THE CHARTISTS IN BRISTOL

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The Chartists in Bristol is the tenth of the pamphlets on local history issued by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association through its Standing Committee on Local History. The author, Dr. John Cannon, is a Lecturer in History in the University of Bristol. In this pamphlet he makes the first detailed investigation of the impact of a great national movement on the City of Bristol and discusses the reasons why it failed to attract as much support there as it did in a number of other towns.

The Branch wishes to express its thanks to the City Reference Library for permission to reproduce a handbill of the Bristol Working Men's Association; to the Trustees of the British Museum for permission to reproduce the illustration of a torchlight demonstration; to Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. for permission to reproduce the picture of Snig's End, Gloucestershire; and to the proprietors of *Punch* for permission to print a *Punch* cartoon. Mr. Kevin Tyndall of the Department of Physics, University of Bristol, very kindly helped in preparing the illustrations.

This series of pamphlets is planned to include new work as well as authoritative summaries of work which has already been done. It is hoped that it will appeal to the general public as well as to students and school children. Details of the pamphlets already published are given on the inside back cover.

The next pamphlet to be issued will be Mr. J. W. Sherborne's *The Port of Bristol in the Middle Ages* which should appear before the end of 1964. This is part of a special series on the history of the port.

The Branch hopes to publish in 1965 a special pamphlet on Sir Ferdinando Gorges and the second part of the pamphlet on the Theatre Royal. Other titles under consideration include Bristol Castle; the Bristol Riots; the Blue Maids' School; the Bristol Customs House; the *Great Britain;* the Bristol Coalfield; the Anti Slavery Movement in Bristol.

The pamphlets can be obtained from most Bristol booksellers or direct from the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association. Mr. Peter Harris, 4 Abbeywood Drive, Stoke Bishop, Bristol 9, handles the distribution, and it will save time if orders are sent direct to him. It would be a great help if as many people as possible would place standing orders for future publications.

THE CHARTISTS IN BRISTOL

by JOHN CANNON

The Chartist agitation, during the opening decade of the reign of Queen Victoria, was the first substantial and articulate working-class movement in British history. Its roots are to be found in the acute social and economic distress of the period, but its immediate aim was political: its sweeping proposals for parliamentary reform, including universal suffrage, would have ushered in democracy and transferred power to the mass of the people. The Chartists were therefore strongly opposed by Whig and Tory alike, agreed in regarding the 1832 Reform Act as a final settlement of the constitution. *Blackwood's Magazine* wrote of universal suffrage that it must inevitably produce 'the destruction of property, order, and civilization', and would prove 'ruinous to the security of life and liberty'. Hence, when the first Chartist petition was presented to the House of Commons in July 1839, Peel and Disraeli from the Tory benches joined Palmerston and Russell on the ministerial side in opposing it, and it was rejected by 237 votes to 48.

None of the previous irruptions into politics by the labouring masses had been organized or sustained on anything like the scale achieved by the Chartists. They were able to make use of the improvements in transport and postal services to reach out to a vast audience through lectures and pamphlets. But the movement, though nation-wide, remained to a great extent incoherent and uncoordinated, and its history must be sought in studies of the various localities.

In 1837, when the London Working Men's Association decided to send missionaries into the provinces to promote a new campaign for parliamentary reform, it had every reason to expect a good response from Bristol. By far the largest city in the west, it had taken a prominent part in the agitation for the Great Reform Act. Many of the labouring population lived in conditions of great squalor, particularly the thousands of Irish immigrants[1]: in the slums of Bristol, around Lewin's Mead, cholera claimed scores of victims during the epidemic of 1849.[2] The mortality rate in the city was exceeded only by that of Manchester and Liverpool.[3]. The Bristol mob was said to be the most ferocious in the country,[4] and the city had a long history of riots and tumults, those of 1793 and

1 A. Alison, *The Principles of Population*, 1840, vol.i. p.529.

2 *Report to the General Board of Health*, 1850.

3 *Second report of the commissioners for inquiring into the state of the large towns*, 1845.

4 W. Sturge, *Recollections*, p.21.

1831 being accompanied by considerable loss of life. There was much material for a protest movement to exploit.

A Bristol branch of the Working Men's Association was in existence by August 1837, with Robert Nicholls, a coffee-house proprietor of Rosemary Street, as secretary, and in October it undertook its first public meeting. The choice of venue did nothing to soothe nervous minds: Queen Square had been the centre of the riots six years before. The main speaker was Henry Vincent, soon to become the lion of west-country Chartism, who had spent the summer touring the provinces on behalf of the London Working Men's Association. Only 24 years of age, a journeyman-printer by trade, his powers of oratory were already exceptional; he combined thunderous denunciation with banter and mimicry. The *Bristol Mercury,* radical in sympathy, gave a column and a half to the meeting. Vincent began by recalling Henry Hunt's visits to the city in the 1820s, and was sure he had ' taught them some sound political opinions '. The Whig government he attacked severely for its betrayal over the Reform Act and for its introduction of the new poor law. The burden of his speech was a direct appeal to class loyalty: ' was it meet that they, who produced by their labour every luxury which the titled aristocracy and the moneymongers enjoyed, should be branded as ignorant slaves, and remain unrepresented in the Commons' House of Parliament ? ' The meeting then passed resolutions in favour of universal suffrage, secret ballot, and the abolition of the property qualification for members of parliament. The *Mercury,* not relishing attacks on the Whigs, took them to task for their ' indiscriminate censure ', while conceding that workingmen had legitimate grievances.

The Charter itself, with its six-point programme of reform, was published in May 1838, and the following month Vincent came down on another tour to organise adoption meetings. On this occasion the Working Men's Association was allowed the use of the Guildhall—' the first meeting of the working classes ever to be held there ', announced the chairman with pride. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal,* high Tory in tone, sneered at ' the glorious unwashed ' ,and dismissed Vincent's contribution as ' a stream of bombast '. The most remarkable of the Chartist speeches came from William Morgan, a tin-plate worker from South Wales, who took the opportunity to complain of the recent Municipal Corporations Act: ' it gave the working man no voice in the election of Councillors but it gave them an armed Bourbon police—a police armed with bludgeons to beat their brains out '. As far as Bristol went, the Chartists regarded themselves as potential victims rather than aggressors. The meeting passed off as decorously as the previous one.

The campaign was now launched. The Bristol Working Men's Association stood, at this time, on the left flank of the movement. It had already questioned the censure passed by the London Working Men's Association on George Julian Harney, one of the militants,[1] and in September 1838 criticized the Birmingham Political Union, in a printed address, for commending the National Guard of Paris. The Bristol branch denied that the National Guard was a progressive force, and argued that it represented ' the exclusive interest of the middle classes,[2] the disagreement was not without significance for the future development of the Chartist movement. But paper controversy at this rarified level was unlikely to make many recruits, and some supporters were already pressing for a more spectacular campaign. The *Mercury,* at the beginning of December, reported that the local leaders had rejected proposals for torchlight demonstrations, and were determined ' to discourage intemperance in language and in conduct '. If this were so, the Mayor of Bristol played into the hands of the extremists. The Working Men's Association had decided to make the adoption of delegates to the forthcoming National Convention the occasion for a supreme effort, with a meeting on December 26th. to be addressed by Vincent, Feargus O'Connor, and John Collins of Birmingham. When the Mayor refused them the use of the Guildhall, they switched the meeting to Brandon Hill, at that time neglected and overgrown with shrubs and bushes. The *Journal* adopted its usual disdainful air: ' The day after Christmas has been selected, no doubt, by reason that on that occasion there are more drunken disorderly vagabonds about the streets than usual .' The city authorities took the meeting seriously. The Duke of Beaufort, High Steward of Bristol, took personal charge of the arrangements to prevent disorder, and troops of the 14th. Light Dragoons and of the Gloucestershire Yeomanry were in readiness. They were not called upon. Brandon Hill was lashed by pelting rain, and the attendance was smaller than expected. O'Connor made a typical speech, balancing between moral and physical force: ' he denounced physical force as much as any man, but to say it was never to be resorted to was to say that men must remain willing slaves for ever'. Vincent began by assuring his hearers that he was determined to ' rouse the people of Bristol from the sleep in which they had too long lain '. The rest of his speech, though moderate compared with some he delivered elsewhere, was nonetheless outspoken: ' the

[1] British Museum Add.MS. 37773, f.97. For Harney, see A. R. Schoye, *The Chartist Challenge.*

[2] Working Men's Association MSS., volume one, ff.172 & 276 (Birmingham Reference Library).

people were called the lower orders, and so they were; they were at the bottom, the middle class was upon them, the aristocracy was upon them, the church was upon the aristocracy, and then at the top came a little useless gilded bauble, the most idle and expensive of all'.

The following months saw a sustained attempt to organize mass support in Bristol. Meetings were held weekly on Brandon Hill: the *Charter* claimed an attendance of ten thousand for one on 31st January, at which Vincent rode in procession on a white horse, and forecast that Bristol would soon be 'one of the most glorious radical cities in the nation'. At another large meeting a week later, Vincent declared his intention of contesting the parliamentary seat at the next election. By this time some of the middle class were growing apprehensive. The *Journal,* in an editorial headed 'Another Moonlight Meeting on Brandon Hill', urged the magistrates to intervene, and declared that respectable citizens were as terrified as they had been before the Reform Bill riots. At the end of February, the first issue of the *Western Vindicator* made its appearance, edited and conducted by Vincent, and aimed specifically at Bristol. 'I shall make a variety of appeals to the people of Bristol in particular', he wrote; and his second issue assured the local Chartists that 'the people expect much from you—your toiling population must set an example to the whole of the West of England'. More open-air meetings were held at Kingswood and at Easton, where the collieries were still in operation.

The local magistrates seem to have been puzzled by the Chartists' tactics. In March the Mayor wrote to the Home Secretary that, in the absence of a direct breach of the peace, he was uncertain what law could be invoked to justify interference.[1] At this stage the government itself was not unduly alarmed. Vincent's correspondence, along with that of three other leaders, had been intercepted and opened, but the Home Secretary thought it unlikely that violence would be attempted.[2] In fact Vincent was finding it far from easy to sustain the campaign in Bristol, and a strained note began to enter his exhortations. 'The city of Bristol must rouse from its sleep', his editorial of 9th March insisted once more; 'let the Convention see that Bristol, though late in the field, will not be the less energetic in the performance of its duty'. But the signs were not encouraging. The Bristol National Rent Committee issued an appeal for contributions to support the Convention, and pointed out that Birmingham had collected £200 and Sheffield £240. Five weeks later the Bristol total was £5, and a correspondent signing

1 J. K. Haberfield to Lord John Russell, 12 Mar. 1839, H.O. 40/47.

2 *Chartist Studies,* ed. Asa Briggs, p. 377.

himself 'Trade Unionist' wrote to the *Vindicator* in great indignation:

> Is not such a proceeding disgraceful to the working-men of Bristol? What can be the cause of this? It cannot be ignorance. I should think it is nothing less than downright selfishness, which, if persevered in much longer, will make Bristol a laughing-stock for all England.

For the time being the Chartists decided to continue with the Brandon Hill meetings, though enthusiasm was flagging, and few of the local men seem to have been ready speakers. And although the strictures of the *Journal* are obviously exaggerated—it dismissed Vincent's followers as 'the veriest scamps', 'vagabonds', and so on—the torchlight processions were bound to attract the noisier elements and bring discredit on the movement. In the meantime tension was rising in the country at large. Opinion in the Convention was moving in favour of 'ulterior measures', and there were frequent reports of Chartists drilling, and of the purchase of pikes and pistols. On 26th April, an unusually large and noisy meeting took place on Brandon Hill. The Mayor reported it, with detailed depositions, to the Home Secretary, assuring him that 'a general apprehension prevails that if meetings are permitted to be held at such unreasonable hours, they will in all probability terminate in most serious riots'.[1] Vincent, in one of his more inflammatory speeches, declared that 'within a month, perhaps within a few nights, the movement would take place which would either end in eternal slavery or universal suffrage'. After the meeting there was a good deal of scuffling in the streets, and William Morgan, the secretary of the local Working Men's Association, was arrested and charged with concealing a weapon. It is a comment on the tense atmosphere that the *Times* should have reported the incident with headlines: the Bristol Chartists, it assured its readers, had been seen 'drilling in bodies in Tyndall's Park'. The *Bristol Journal,* not to be outbid in melodrama, announced the 'examination of a Chartist pikeman'. Morgan was accused of producing an iron-bar from his trouser-leg when spoken to in the street by one of the 'Bourbon police' whose existence he had previously deplored. But the proceedings in court the following day, in the presence of a large crowd, scarcely lived up to these sensational preliminaries. Morgan told the bench that he had a long walk home to Fishponds in the dark, and had taken the iron-bar as a protection against savage dogs. The magistrates accepted this feeble explanation, and bound him over for twelve months on sureties of good behaviour.

1 Haberfield to Russell, 29 Apr. 1839.

At this juncture the Chartists' opponents decided on counter-attack, and a pamphlet entitled 'The People's Charter, or Old England for Ever' made its appearance.[1] It took the form of a conversation between 'Farmer Steady' and a working-man named 'Dick Dudgeon', who had been foolish enough to attend the Brandon Hill demonstrations with a friend, 'Will Grumble'. The frontispiece anticipated the discussion: a female figure of singularly villainous aspect, wearing the garb of 'Equality', was shown with pike and dagger in hand trampling on the scales of justice. Farmer Steady began by rejoicing that Chartism had made little progress in the west country, and went on to chill Dudgeon's blood with a lurid description of the French Revolution. Since Steady's contribution took more than ninety per cent of the available space, the debate was somewhat one-sided. However, Dudgeon was permitted to venture the suggestion that the poorer classes were under the yoke of the aristocracy. Farmer Steady's reply was, at least, forthright:

> Are not horses horses, and geese geese? Are not the rich rich and the poor poor? What, man, do you think to alter the order of nature and of Providence? Does not the Bible tell you that 'the poor will never cease out of the land'? . . Pride and Envy is at the bottom of all these wild notions of liberty and equality.

This fairly unsophisticated answer was too much for Dudgeon, whose conversion was gratifyingly complete:

> You are a far better judge of these things than I am. I am right glad I've met you and heard your good counsel. I always had a secret liking to the old government of King and Lords and Commons, though these speeches and newspapers about the People's Charter bamboozled me for a time. But I see how it is all men are not equal, and 'tis impossible to make them so.

The local magistrates were determined not to let the situation get out of hand. On 4th May they agreed that the police should be armed with cutlasses, and ordered two hundred from London with all possible haste.[2] Two days later, Vincent was arrested on a charge of unlawful assembly at Newport. In the meantime the Mayor of Bristol made a special visit to London to consult Lord John Russell at the Home Office, and persuaded the Metropolitan Police to second an experienced officer, Superintendent Mallalieu, to replace the Bristol superintendent who had just died. On his return he issued a proclamation against disorderly assemblies, and

1 Bristol Reference Library.

2 Watch Committee Proceedings 1838-1841, f. 137.

BRISTOL
Working Men's
Association.

A PUBLIC
Meeting

Of the Inhabitants of this City, convened by the Working Men's Association, will be held

In Queen Square,

***On Monday, October* 23, 1837,**

AT ONE O'CLOCK,

For the purpose of making a Declaration of our Political principles, and to appeal to our fellow Citizens on the necessity of Union to carry those principles into effect.

MR. HENRY VINCENT,

Missionary of the LONDON WORKING MEN'S ASSOCIATION, WILL ADDRESS THE MEETING.

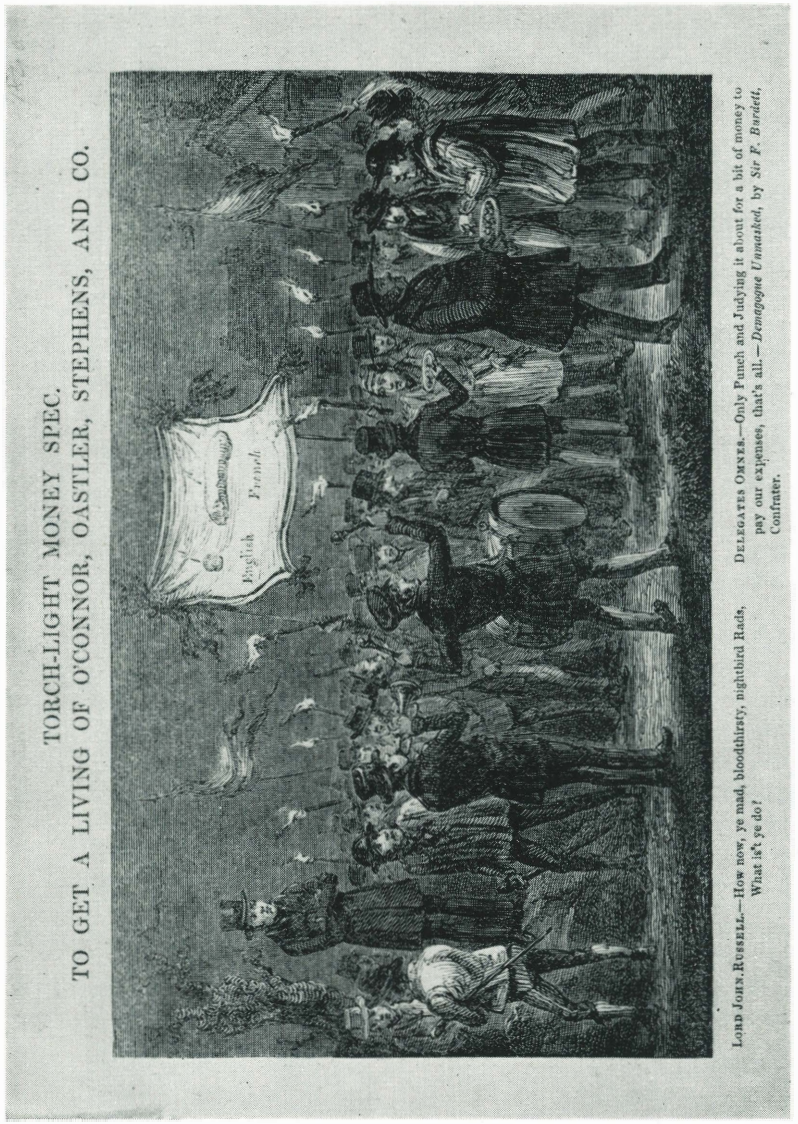
☞ ***Chair to be taken at Half past One.***

Working Men of BRISTOL! arouse from your apathy,—learn your just rights, and how to maintain them!

Sherring, Printer, 42, Castle-Street.

Handbill announcing the first Chartist meeting to be held in Bristol.

By courtesy of Bristol Reference Library



A cartoon from the winter of 1839-40, when Lord John Russell was Home Secretary, and the campaign of torchlight demonstrations was at its height. The banner with the loaves suggests that there was still considerable sympathy within Chartist ranks at this time for the Anti-Corn Law League.

By permission of the Trustees of the British Museum

later in the month forbade the sale of unstamped newspapers on the Exchange—a hit at the *Vindicator*. The Chartist Convention, meeting in London, responded to the news of Vincent's arrest, by calling for mass demonstrations all over the country on Whit Monday.[1] The Bristol Chartists made plans to join forces with their comrades at Bath, and began to organize a march. Just before the holiday two more Chartists were arrested in Bristol: both hailed from Newport, and were said to have eleven pistols in their possession, as well as copies of the obnoxious *Vindicator*.[2] The preparations made at this stage by the authorities were formidable. Full advantage was taken of the government's permission to form a local defence association. Five hundred persons were enrolled in Clifton in the first few days, and more than four thousand altogether, though it is doubtful if they were ever armed.[3] Superintendent Mallalieu, having inspected the local police and pronounced them of 'great efficiency', drew up a detailed plan to deal with the march. Almost the whole force was to be in readiness at the Exchange from seven a.m. onwards, with eleven men to be left in reserve at each of the four depots: 'these men will be supplied with a pistol and ten rounds of ammunition and cutlasses, but it is not proposed to arm the general body until an emergency occurs'. Six men, in plain clothes, were to attend the procession 'and communicate with Mr. Mallalieu from time to time'. Finally, to boost morale, an allowance of one shilling a man 'for refreshment' was authorized.[4] The police were supported by a detachment of artillery from Woolwich, and by the 29th Infantry, which paraded meaningfully on College Green. Over the holiday itself, the Mayor and a large body of the local magistrates were ready at a moment's notice, and units of the Gloucestershire Yeomanry Cavalry stood under arms all night in the Cattle Market. Nothing more terrifying occurred than an outbreak of chalking on the walls of the city—'Vincent for ever!' and 'Tyranny beware'. On Whit Monday, a small party of Chartists, with four flags, walked to Bath to join in the demonstration at Midford: as far as Bristol was concerned 'no Whit Monday passed off more peaceably'.[5]

There is, in fact, no evidence that the Bristol Chartists ever contemplated an appeal to force, however heady the Brandon Hill

1 R. G. Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement*, p. 109.

2 Haberfield to Russell, 21 May 1839, H.O. 40/47; *Bristol Journal*, 25 May 1839.

3 *Bristol Journal*, 11 May 1839; *Bristol Mercury*, 25 May 1839; F. C. Mather, *Public Order in the age of the Chartists*, p.91.

4 Watch Committee Proceedings 1838-1841, f. 157.

5 *Bristol Mirror*, 25 May 1839.

speeches might have been. Though they organized themselves into contingents, they insisted that this was for self-defence—a reasonable enough plea after Vincent had been severely manhandled by a mob at Devizes on Easter Monday. One of their own members who resigned at the end of April, and submitted a confidential statement to the Home Office, while agreeing that many of the Chartists were armed, denied that they advocated physical force: McKay and Morgan had both said 'if force is attempted, they will resign'.[1] In June, the Working Men's Association appealed once more for the use of the Guildhall, and was again refused. The *Journal* waxed indignant that these 'factious demagogues' should make yet another attempt 'to delude and mislead the industrious operatives of this city', and recommended the magistrates to make arrests 'at the utterance of the first seditious word'. But if the *Journal* was spoiling for a fight, the Chartists were not. They announced that they would forego the customary procession, and at the meeting itself their chairman urged them to 'give their enemies no advantage by a breach of the peace'.

Meanwhile Vincent had been released on bail. His next appearance in the city bore witness to a transformation as improbable as any in Hardy's novels—he arrived on Brandon Hill as a dissenting minister to preach a sermon on the text "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake". His new character did not inhibit him from severe attacks on the aristocracy and the poor law. But his support was waning. When the National Convention met in London to discuss proposals for a general strike or 'sacred month', the *Bristol Mirror* reported:

> A letter from Mr. Frost dated 18th July from Bristol was read, stating that he had attended a meeting at that place, and he did not think the working classes would at present obey the orders of the Convention for keeping the sacred month . . . We cannot have a more convincing testimony of the good feeling that exists among the mechanics of this city. We hope the conduct of these leaders will be seen in its true light by those few persons who have given them countenance at the Brandon Hill meetings.

The demagogic phase of Bristol Chartism was now over, and the last of the Brandon Hill meetings, poorly attended, was held in August. At the Monmouth Assizes at the beginning of the month, Vincent had been sent to gaol for a year.[2]. His absence was keenly felt. There were plenty of local members like Morgan or Felix Simeon, the printer, who could interrupt meetings and propose reso-

1 Statement by — Richards, 4 May 1839, H.O. 40/47.

2 He was sentenced to a further twelve month's on a second charge in March 1840.

lutions, but none who could draw an audience. There was something peculiarly unconvincing about the devices to which the Chartists now resorted in their search for support—a Bristol Female Patriotic Association, a Bristol Joint Stock Provision Company, and a Universal Suffrage Total Abstinence Society. In September 1839, imitating the more enterprising Bath Chartists, they decided to organize a mass attendance at the Cathedral. Only fifty answered the call. 'We have not heard', wrote the *Journal* sourly, 'that they committed any impropriety other than putting on their hats previous to leaving the church'. In December, the *Vindicator* ceased publication, and in the spring of 1840 the Bristol secretary begged O'Connor to visit the city again: 'he would do an immense deal of good, as we have no agitators in the west'.[1] But O'Connor had more promising areas to attend, and the local Chartists were left to organize their own affairs. The driving force in the city was now Morgan. In July 1840 he attended the Manchester Conference on behalf of Bristol, Bath and Cheltenham, and took the leading part in organizing a local branch of the new National Charter Association. At the elections for the Chartist national executive in May 1841, 197 members recorded their votes from Bristol—a fairly high figure compared with other towns, and suggesting a good level of organization. But the modest progress that the local Chartists were now beginning to make was soon to be vitiated by internal controversies.

With the approach of a general election, the two political parties became interested in the Chartists as potential supporters. As early as February 1839 the Liberal member for Bristol, F. M. H. Berkeley, in an exchange of letters with the Working Men's Association, had tried to turn their agitation against the Corn Laws. Throughout 1839 the local newspapers, while agreeing to deplore Chartism itself, jockeyed for party advantage. The liberal *Gazette* accused the Tory newspapers of giving the Chartists easy publicity in order to embarrass Lord Melbourne's government, and insisted that the origins of the movement were to be found in the Tory-inspired agitation against the poor law. The *Journal* retorted that Chartism stemmed from the disappointment felt at the failure of the Liberals to keep their promises. In the early days of the movement, Chartist speakers abused Liberals and Tories impartially, though the Liberals, as the party in power, came in for more detailed attention. But after the arrests of the summer of 1839, Chartist opinion hardened against the Liberals. In October 1839 the local association issued an address advising voters in the municipal elections to keep out the Liberals. When the Liberals lost six seats

1 *Northern Star*, 15 Feb. 1840.

to the Tories, the Chartists claimed the credit, especially for the loss of Bedminster, where the Liberals were said to have boasted that they could carry a mop-stick.[1] In March 1840 the Liberals held an anti-Corn Law meeting in the Exchange. The Chartists attended in force, and carried an amendment in favour of the six points. Felix Simeon, their chief spokesman in the absence of Vincent, launched a ferocious attack on the 'base, bloody, and brutal Whigs', and dismissed corn-law repeal as ' a bribe to the working classes '. Eventually the meeting broke up in disorder. The *Journal,* delighted at the Whigs' discomfiture, opened its columns to a letter from the Chartists, asserting that repeal would bring wages down to continental levels. The Whigs explained the fiasco as a Tory plot: '*Amicus Populi*' testified that he had seen ' several well-known ultra-Tories hovering on the outskirts of the meeting, chuckling as the discontents of the Chartists increased '. The *Mercury* warned Chartists that they could expect no mercy from a Tory government —they would be ' cut down and slaughtered wholesale '. Simeon replied that open enemies were better than false friends, and at a Working Men's Association meeting in May 1840 Morgan reiterated —' at any sacrifice they would put out the Whigs '. Later in the year, however, the Chartists were strangely subdued. The movement was troubled by internal struggles, and in Bristol they were temporarily outshone by the new Socialist sect, whose Hall of Science, established in Broadmead in December 1840, was the centre of much rioting in the following months.[2] When the general election came in June 1841, the Chartists, despite repeated promises to run a candidate, contented themselves with publishing an address against Berkeley.

The release of Vincent early in 1841 must have raised Chartist hopes in the city. But the Vincent who emerged from gaol was a changed man. He had spent much of his time in study and reflection. To Francis Place he wrote, a month before his release:[3]

> I am determined to adhere to the working classes, but I will have nothing to do with childish displays nor with any unlawful proceedings. I am convinced that the real practical agitation now to be carried on is the forming of societies in the various towns for the raising of halls in which the members may meet for the acquisition of political, moral, and scientific information.

1 Working Men's Association MSS., volume two, f.148 (Birmingham); *Western Vindicator,* 19 Oct. 1839.

2 In January 1841, Robert Owen himself took part in a most melodramatic debate on ' What is Socialism ? ' on three successive evenings in Ryan's Arena, Montagu St. *Bristol Mercury,* 9 Jan. 1841.

3 Place Collection, Set. 56, Oct. 1840/Feb. 1841, f. 47.

He returned to Bath, set up as a printer, and in June 1841 began issuing the *National Vindicator.* His newly acquired moderation soon brought him into conflict with O'Connor, whose influence over the movement had increased markedly while Vincent had been in gaol. In March 1841, when Vincent expressed his support for Lovett's ' new move '—to set up a national association for education and propaganda—he was hotly denounced by O'Connor and his followers. In the Bristol movement, Vincent had the support of Morgan, but the rank and file was with O'Connor. At the end of April they passed a vote of confidence in O'Connor, thanking him for his ' almost superhuman exertions in the Cause '.[1] The following month a special meeting was summoned to hear Vincent's explanation. Vincent temporized, agreed that it would not be practicable to press forward with the ' new move ' in the face of strong opposition within the movement, and for the time being a breach was avoided. O'Connor's chief supporter in Bristol was Simeon, who told a delegate conference in October:

> Lectures will do no good in Bristol. We want public demonstrations. When lectures are announced, people look on it as a sort of dry intellectual affair, and will not attend.

In December 1841 Vincent and O'Connor spoke from the same platform in the Hall of Science at Broadmead. But immediately afterwards the whole controversy broke out afresh when Joseph Sturge, the Birmingham Quaker with Bristol connections, began his efforts to reconcile the working and middle class reformers in the Complete Suffrage Union. O'Connor dismissed it contemptuously as ' the humbug trap ', but Vincent was sympathetic. The Bristol branch, which had just thanked Vincent warmly for his ' prompt attendance to our calls ', was again plunged into discord. At the beginning of April Vincent and R. K. Philp, his partner, held a meeting on Brandon Hill to justify their attitude. Simeon attended, denounced them for summoning a meeting without the approval of the Chartist council, and a week later a formal censure on Vincent was passed. Nevertheless, he attended the Birmingham Conference of the Complete Suffrage Union, and defended himself in the *Vindicator*: ' it was a cheering sight to see men of all classes assembled together, calmly discussing great principles. The braggart or buffoon would soon have found a level '. This was pointed, and O'Connor hit back at once, dismissing Vincent as a ' political pedlar ' and ' a pompous noisy blockhead '. But Vincent had not the weight to be a serious challenge to O'Connor. The *Vindicator* was forced to close through lack of funds, and he moved back to

1 *Northern Star,* 24 Apr. 1841.

London, becoming a full-time lecturer for the Complete Suffrage Union.

The quarrel between the Sturgeites and the O'Connor Chartists convulsed the Bristol movement for the rest of the year. The Complete Suffrage Union held its first meeting in the city on 28th May; at its next, it claimed to have one hundred members. In July a Complete Suffrage Union meeting in the Full Moon Tavern, Broad Street, became so noisy that the landlord insisted on the audience leaving. The O'Connorites attended in force, and moved one of their own number to take the chair. Morgan, attempting to speak for the Complete Suffrage Union, was howled down with cries of 'Liar' and 'Traitor'. On the next occasion, in August, the Complete Suffrage Union was better prepared, and an O'Connorite amendment, thanking the 'consistent Chartists', was easily defeated. But in the autumn of 1842 O'Connor reconsidered his attitude, and decided to participate with Sturge in a conference to be held at Birmingham. By the rules of the conference, Bristol was entitled to four delegates. At the nominating meeting at the Hall of Science on 14th December, the O'Connorites turned up two hundred strong. Another riot ensued, and the Complete Suffrage Union members withdrew to a nearby coffee-house, where they elected four moderates. The O'Connorites sent their four, headed by Simeon. Vincent, attending as the delegate from Ipswich, went with the Sturgeites when the conference split in two, and parted company with the Chartist movement.

The Bristol O'Connorites now adopted much of the programme of their 'new move' opponents, and most of 1843 was devoted to routine meetings and lecture courses. A visit from O'Connor himself in July to expound his new land scheme failed to arouse any lasting enthusiasm. For the most part, the converted preached to the converted. Simeon, at a delegate conference at Bath in October, argued hopefully that 'though they had not perhaps at present the numbers they had during the height of the agitation, they possessed the same power—they had more intelligence with them'. At the beginning of 1844 they were still holding regular meetings, discussing such questions as "Ought the free exercise of opinion to be restricted?", but by the end of the year there was only fitful activity. Even O'Connor could hardly deny that the movement was flagging. At the annual Convention in April 1845 he admitted that there was 'a sort of lull', but suggested cheerfully that the prosperity could not last.

The Bristol movement was saved from extinction by the introduction of the Land Scheme, whereby Chartist settlements, divided into small-holdings, were to be established. Two of the estates purchased by the Land Company were in Gloucestershire, at Snig's End and

Red Marley, which may have helped to kindle interest locally. When Thomas Clark, of the Chartist executive, came to the city in November 1845 to explain the scheme, a branch of the Land Company was said to be already in existence: a year later, the seventy-five members owned one hundred shares between them, and were holding regular weekly meetings. With this encouragement, the National Charter Association began to stir once more. A meeting in September 1846 agreed to 're-organize' the local branch, and thirty members were enrolled. But the extent to which the movement was in decay can be judged from the elections to the national executive in 1847: Bristol recorded twenty-five votes, all for the retiring members, and O'Connor's total national vote was a mere 455.

The general election of 1847 found the Bristol Chartists in a parlous state. They did, however, try a last-minute intervention, combining with the Dissenters and the remnants of the Complete Suffrage Union to bring forward Apsley Pellatt, a London glass manufacturer, and a close friend of Edward Miall, editor of the *Nonconformist*. His main hope lay not so much in the Chartists as in the Dissenting vote, and his programme included church disestablishment. The enterprise served only to confirm how weak local Chartism was. Simeon and his friends were scarcely able to get their candidate a hearing at the hustings, and he polled only 171, against 4381 for Berkeley, 2595 for Miles, and 2476 for Fripp. 'A very small Pellatt from a very small pop-gun', was Berkeley's predictable comment. At Ipswich, Vincent polled 546 and was only 162 votes behind the second member, while O'Connor was returned for Nottingham with 1257.

The year 1848 saw a remarkable, though brief, revival in Chartist fortunes, partly in response to continental events. Another National Convention was summoned, and a new petition for reform set in motion. In April, open-air meetings on Brandon Hill were resumed. On Monday 3rd, the petition was adopted, together with a resolution pledging support to the French insurgents. At another meeting, on the 17th, Ernest Jones, one of the militant fringe, was the chief speaker. 'Was it not monstrous', he asked his audience, 'that when all the nations of Europe had broken their bonds, England should take a retrograde movement?' This brought an immediate retort from Robert Norris, a prominent nonconformist who had supported Pellatt, disavowing any threat of force. The old rift in the movement was still apparent. In the country at large the disappointment engendered by the fiasco of the national petition, coupled with strong government action, soon damped down the momentary enthusiasm. In July the Bristol magistrates received an appeal from a M. Hilaire for permission to lecture on Brandon Hill on the French Revolution, and prudently decided not to give it.

The local Chartists now slid back into their former position as a small and insignificant clique. As the National Charter Association slowly disintegrated, year by year, they persevered with their weekly meetings and their collections. In July 1849 they begged O'Connor not to abandon the Land Company, but to continue with his ' wonderful enterprise '. The following year, ever hopeful, they needed only a hint to form themselves into a new ' Democratic Association ', and announced yet more weekly discussions: there was, they considered, ' every prospect of a glorious organization of democrats in this city '.[1] But by 1852, with O'Connor insane, and the contributions to the national executive a mere trickle, the confidence of even the Bristol members was undermined. In March they issued a statement regretting ' the apathy and disunion that years of blighted hopes have produced ', and called for a reconstruction of the movement to bring in the middle classes—thus reverting to the policy that Vincent had preached in vain to them ten years earlier. Even in this, their genius for disharmony remained with them, and their approaches to T. S. Duncombe, the radical M.P., for a ' real People's Party ', ended in recriminations.[2] In June 1852 they found yet another opportunity for disagreement when they debated whether to accept the Manchester Conference as duly constituted. Of the eleven members voting, three, including the Secretary formed a minority, and ' ordered the Financial Secretary to erase their names from the books '. Thus, wrangling to the last, they disappear from view.[3]

It is clear that Bristol's response to Chartism was tepid. In the spring of 1839 one of the Chartists put their numbers at about 800, compared with 1800 in Bath, a town of one-fifth the size.[4] The *Mercury* wrote in February 1840 that it was notorious that there were fewer Chartists in Bristol than in any other comparable city, and three years later a Chartist came to the gloomy conclusion that it was ' decidedly the most prejudiced, bigoted, and priest-ridden city of the Empire '.[5] The contrast with some of the Northern towns is marked: at Sheffield, for example, the Chartists contested the general elections of 1841 and 1847, and in 1849 held 22 of the 56 seats on the Town Council.[6]

1 *Northern Star,* 28 July 1849 and 9 Nov. 1850.

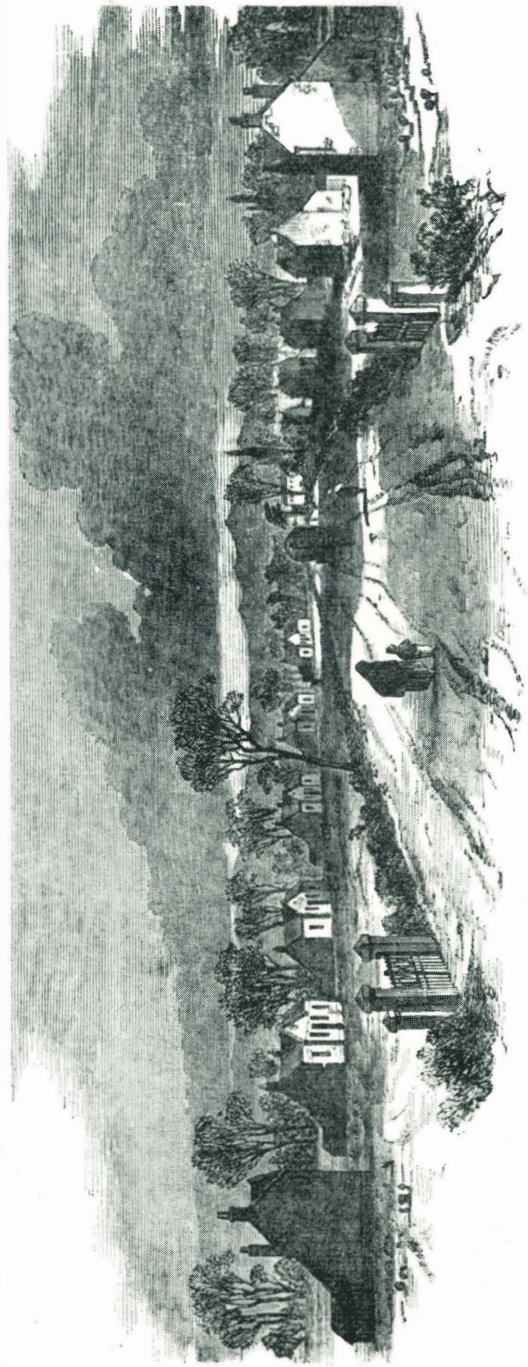
2 *The Star of Freedom,* 17 Apr. 1852 and 22 May 1852.

3 *The Star of Freedom,* 12 June 1852.

4 Statement, 4 May 1839, H.O. 40/47.

5 Letter from W. H. Clifton, *Northern Star,* 29 July 1843.

6 S. Pollard, *A History of Labour in Sheffield,* pp.47-9.



THE CHARTIST SETTLEMENT AT SNIG'S END, GLOUCESTERSHIRE.

Two of the five estates purchased by the National Land Company were in Gloucestershire, on either side of the village of Staunton. O'Connor claimed that, if supported, the Land Scheme could ' make a paradise of England in less than five years '. Nevertheless, only 250 of the 70,000 members of the Land Company were found allotments. The cottages on these estates, and at Minster Lovell, Oxfordshire, are well preserved and inhabited to this day. The hills in the background are the Malverns.

A PHYSICAL FORCE CHARTIST ARMING FOR THE FIGHT.

A cartoon from *Punch* in the summer of 1848. In its early numbers *Punch* showed much sympathy for the Chartists. An article of 1842 declared: 'Chartism is born of defeated hope; it has been fostered by the selfish spirit of Mammon—by a sordid, remorseless contempt of the inalienable rights of humanity. The vice of the age is a want of sympathy with the condition of the great mass of the people . . . the Chartists themselves have a degree of intelligence, a power of concentration, a knowledge of the details of public business, heretofore unknown to great popular combinations of dissentients'. But the fiasco of the 1848 petition, shown to include hundreds of palpable forgeries, turned the movement into an object of ridicule.

By permission of Punch

Part of the explanation may lie in the the economic structure of the city. In general, the areas most receptive to Chartism were those dependent to an unhealthy extent on one industry. In Bath, for instance, the decay of the tourist industry left the town without alternative means of support;[1] and in North Gloucestershire the recession of 1842 created widespread unemployment among the cloth workers.[2] The economy of Bristol, though sluggish, was singularly diversified. In addition to the activity of the port itself, there were coal mines, tobacco warehouses, soap and bottle factories, shipbuilding yards, iron foundries, distilleries, potteries, sugar refineries, and brass works. It was consequently better able to ride a period of depression than many other towns. In 1845, a local surgeon testified:[3]

> It is probable that the poorer classes in Bristol are not subject to such extreme destitution as in some manufacturing towns . . . The labouring classes are not subject to large fluctuations between high wages and total want of employment; therefore, large masses of artisans suddenly reduced to a state bordering on starvation are fortunately unknown to us.

As far as the maintenance of law and order was concerned, the memory of the 1831 riots, after which the Mayor had been tried for neglect of duty, undoubtedly encouraged the magistrates to act with firmness. They were aided by the fact that the Bristol police force, established under the Municipal Corporations Act, was one of the strongest in the country: the ratio of police to population was 1-521 in Bristol, compared to 1-1306 at Leeds, 1-4837 at Bolton, and 1-6299 at Walsall[4] The permanent force was also augmented on occasions: in January 1839, for example, the Somerset bench appointed 45 special constables in the Brislington area alone.[5] With the backing of the military, the authorities could deploy overwhelming force.

The basic tactical problem, from the Chartist point of view, was the relationship with the middle classes. The Bristol Chartists saw

1 R. B. Pugh, 'Chartism in Somerset and Wiltshire', *Chartist Studies*, ed. Asa Briggs. Another account of Bath Chartism is to be found in an unpublished University of Bristol M.A. thesis by R. S. Neale, 'Economic conditions and working class movements in the city of Bath 1800-1850'. This questions some of Pugh's conclusions.

2 See editorial of 15 Jan. 1842 in *Bristol Mercury*, drawing attention to the 'fearful evidence' of decline in the west country woollen industry.

3 *Second report on the state of large towns*, p.75.

4 F. C. Mather, *Public order in the age of the Chartists*. Appendix 1.

5 Report, 23 Jan. 1839, H.O. 40/47.

very clearly that the Reform Act of 1832 had been forced through only by an alliance of the middle and working classes. Moses Clements, speaking in June 1838, complained that ' the working classes had helped to get the franchise for the middle classes, by whom they were now deserted ', and Felix Simeon, in August 1839, explained that his interest in politics dated from 1831: ' if Lord John Russell had not first drawn us forth into political turmoils ... I for one should now be at home at my work. He taught me my political power '.[1] But they were extremely reluctant to accept the conclusion that their own policies demanded a similar alliance, and they laboured almost completely without middle class support. The more prosperous members of the middle class, who might have had some sympathy with Chartism, were easily alarmed, particularly by Vincent's republicanism. Hence, it was left to small tradesmen to provide the local leadership: John Chappell, the first Treasurer, was a newsagent; Charles Clark, secretary to the Land Company branch, was a small coal-merchant, who had been fined for giving short-weight; John Newman of Gloucester Lane, active throughout the whole period, was a baker and grocer; John Copp, a shoemaker; Robert Nicholls, a coffee-house proprietor and part-time tailor. Sturge's campaign for a reconciliation of classes had little effect in Bristol, though the emnity seems to have come, on this occasion, from the Chartist side. Only during the 1847 election did some of the middle class dissenters collaborate with the Chartists, and the result was not encouraging. For the most part, the dissenters kept aloof, or were positively hostile, as at Bath, where the Wesleyans warned their flocks that ' any member of the Methodist connexion who should join himself with the Chartists should be excluded from their body '.[2]

In fact it is doubtful whether there was any serious possibility of the six points being carried at this time. If it came to violence, the middle class wielded preponderant power: if it rested with persuasion, they could not accept annual parliaments or manhood suffrage. Some of the Chartist leaders, like Vincent, soon realised that force was not the answer, but they were much too sanguine about the chances of middle class co-operation. Others, like O'Connor, who were rightly sceptical of the value of wooing the middle classes, could not accept that the alternative—force—was out of the question. Each group saw half of the truth. Hence, the Chartists lurched from physical force to moral force and back again —an oscillation very apparent in the Bristol movement. But, in practice, neither alternative was viable. Hence, much of the

1 *Bristol Mercury*, 16 June 1838; *Bristol Journal*, 17 Aug. 1839.

2 W. Dorling, *Henry Vincent*.

criticism levelled at the Chartist leadership is beside the point. No one could deny that their feuds and differences damaged the Chartist cause. But these feuds were, in the last analysis, symptoms rather than the cause of weakness. It takes a brilliant general to lead a doomed army.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The greater part of the material comes from contemporary newspapers. The Bristol Reference Library has copies of *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal,* the *Bristol Mirror,* the *Bristol Mercury,* and the *Bristol Gazette.* It also possesses a considerable number of broadsheets and pamphlets, in various collections, though these are not usually indexed, and are difficult to use. Copies of Vincent's newspaper, the *Western Vindicator,* and its sequel the *National Vindicator* are held by the Newport Reference Library. Another run of the *Western Vindicator,* together with cuttings from other newspapers, is in the Vincent Papers, held by the Labour Party at Transport House. The Place Collection, in the British Museum, includes the *Northern Star, The Star of Freedom, The Charter,* and the *British Statesman* (a C.S.U. newspaper). All the reporting is extremely partisan, and it is scarcely possible to make any estimate of the number of persons attending a meeting.

Correspondence between the Bristol magistrates and the Home Secretary can be found in the Home Office papers in the Public Record Office, particularly H.O.40/47. The Bristol Watch Committee proceedings are held by the Archives Department in the Council House, and contain much interesting material on the early days of the Bristol police-force. The papers of the London Working Men's Association, including letters from Vincent to Lovett, are in the British Museum, Add.MSS. 34245 & 37773. More letters from Vincent are contained in the Place Collection, Set 56. The Birmingham Reference Library has manuscript volumes belonging to the London Working Men's Association, the National Association, and the Complete Suffrage Union: these form part of the Lovett Collection.

There is a biography of Henry Vincent by W. Dorling, and biographies of Joseph Sturge by S. Hobhouse, A. Peckover, and H. Richard. References to Vincent occur in R. G. Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement;* W. Lovett, *Life and Struggles;* G. J. Holyoake, *Sixty Years of an Agitator's Life*; *Life of Thomas Cooper,* by himself; H. Solly, *These Eighty Years.* The most useful modern works are G. D. H. Cole, *Chartist Portraits*; A. Briggs (ed.), *Chartist Studies*; D. Williams, *John Frost*; A. R. Schoyen, *The Chartist Challenge*; F. C. Mather, *Public order in the age of the Chartists.* D. Read and E. Glasgow have recently published the first biography of Feargus O'Connor.

PREVIOUS PUBLICATIONS

1. *The Bristol Hotwell* by Vincent Waite.
2. *Bristol and Burke* by P. T. Underdown.
3. *The Theatre Royal: the first seventy years* by Kathleen Barker.
4. *The Merchant Adventures of Bristol in the Fifteenth Century* by E. M. Carus-Wilson.
5. *The Port of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* by Walter Minchinton.
6. *Thomas Chatterton* by Basil Cottle.
7. *Bristol and the Slave Trade* by C. M. MacInnes.
8. *The Steamship Great Western* by Grahame Farr.
9. *Mary Carpenter of Bristol* by R. J. Saywell.

Pamphlets 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 are sold at two shillings each (2/2½d. post free. Pamphlets 7, 8 and 9 cost two shillings and sixpence (2/8½d. post free). Pamphlet No. 5 is the first in a series on the Port of Bristol. It is larger than those in the general series and has more illustrations. Its price is three shillings and sixpence (3/10d. post free).

Orders by post should be sent to Peter Harris, 4 Abbeywood Drive, Stoke Bishop, Bristol 9.