

Part 6 – The Newport Rising and 1842 Depression

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Newport Rising – November 1839

There had already been a number of outbreaks of violence across the country, leading to arrests and trials, but this was the largest to date. One of the leaders of the Chartist movement, John Frost, on trial for treason, claimed in his defence that he had toured his territory of industrial Wales urging people not to break the law, although he was himself guilty of using language that some might interpret as a call to arms. Dr William Price of Llantrisant, who was more of a maverick than a mainstream Chartist—described Frost as putting "a sword in my hand and a rope around my neck".

Unsurprisingly, there are no surviving letters outlining plans for insurrection, but Chartists had undoubtedly started organising physical force. By early autumn men were being drilled and armed in south Wales, and also in the West Riding. Secret cells were set up, covert meetings were held in the Chartist Caves at Llangynidr and weapons were manufactured as the Chartists armed themselves. Behind closed doors and in pub back rooms, plans were drawn up for a mass protest.

On the night of 3–4 November 1839 Frost led several thousand marchers through South Wales to the Westgate Hotel in Newport, where there was a confrontation. It seems that Frost and other local leaders were expecting to seize the town and trigger a national uprising. The result of the Newport Rising was a disaster for Chartism. The hotel was occupied by armed soldiers. A brief, violent, and bloody battle ensued. Shots were fired by both sides, although most contemporaries agree that the soldiers holding the building had vastly superior firepower. The Chartists were forced to retreat in disarray: more than twenty were killed and at least another fifty wounded.

The Yorkshire Chartist Ben Wilson was one of several whose testimonies stated that success at Newport was to have been the signal for a national uprising. Despite this significant setback the movement remained remarkably buoyant and remained so until late 1842. Whilst the majority of Chartists, under the leadership of Feargus O'Connor, concentrated on petitioning for Frost, Williams and William Jones to be pardoned, significant minorities in Yorkshire planned their risings in response. Samuel Holberry led an abortive rising in Sheffield on 12 January, 1840, and on 26 January Robert Peddie attempted similar action in Bradford. In both Sheffield and Bradford spies had kept magistrates aware of the conspirators' plans, and these attempted risings were easily quashed. Frost and two other Newport leaders, Jones and Williams, were tried and transported to Van Dieman's Land. Holberry and Peddie received long prison sentences with hard labour in Britain, many others were tried and received similar sentences, including further deportations. Holberry died in prison and thus became a Chartist martyr. Frost held to his beliefs throughout his life, even after his sentence having been completed, he left Australia for the USA, and years later, back to Bristol.

1842 Depression

This probably stems from the earlier 1837 Panic, which occurred in the USA. By 1842, the USA had partially recovered, but other parts of the world, including Britain, were feeling serious effects. As economic activity reduced, employers cut wages and laid off workers. This led to a wave of strikes by workers.

A Second Chartist petition, of over three million signatures, had been submitted to Parliament in May 1842, but was again rejected. This led to calls for the implementation of the Charter to be included alongside demands for the restoration of wages to previous levels.

Working people went on strike in 14 English and 8 Scottish counties, principally in the Midlands, Lancashire and Cheshire, Yorkshire, and the Strathclyde region of Scotland. Typically, strikers resolved to cease work until wages were increased and "until the People's charter becomes the Law of the Land". How far these strikes were directly Chartist in inspiration was then, as now, a subject of much controversy. The *Leeds Mercury* headlined them "The Chartist Insurrection", but suspicion also hung over the Anti-Corn Law League that manufacturers among its members deliberately closed mills to stir-up unrest. At the time, these disputes were collectively known as the *Plug Plot* as, in many cases, protesters removed the plugs from the steam boilers powering industry to prevent their use.

The strikes and unrest began in the Potteries of Staffordshire in early August, spreading north to Cheshire and Lancashire (where at Manchester a meeting of the Chartist national executive endorsed the strikes on the 16th). The strikes had begun spreading in Scotland and West Yorkshire from the 13th. There were outbreaks of serious violence, including property destruction and the ambushing of police convoys, in the Potteries and the West Riding. Though the government deployed soldiers to suppress violence, they did not bring about the end of them. Rather, it was the practical problems in sustaining an indefinite stoppage that ultimately defeated the strikers. The drift back to work began on 19 August. Only Lancashire and Cheshire were still strike-bound by September, the Manchester power loom weavers being the last to return to work on 26 September.

Nevertheless, the state hit back. Several Chartist leaders were arrested, including Feargus O'Connor, George Julian Harney, and Thomas Cooper. During the late summer of 1842, hundreds were incarcerated; in the Pottery Riots (which took place in Hanley and Burslem, in Staffs.) alone, 116 men and women went to prison. A smaller number, but still amounting to many dozens – such as William Ellis, who was convicted on perjured evidence – were transported. One protester, Josiah Heapy (19 years old), was shot dead. However, the government's most ambitious prosecution, personally led by the Attorney General, of O'Connor and 57 others (including almost all Chartism's national executive) failed: none were convicted of the serious charges, and those found guilty of minor offences were never actually sentenced. Cooper alone of the national Chartist leadership was convicted (at a different trial), having spoken at strike meetings in the Potteries. He was to write a long poem in prison called "The Purgatory of Suicides."

In December 1842 the Chartists held a joint national delegate conference with the National Complete Suffrage Union in Birmingham. Tensions with the NCSU soon surfaced and came to a head over their proposals both for a union with the Anti-Corn Law League, which was also broadly middle class, and for rewriting the People's Charter as a legislative Bill of Rights. In both, O'Connor perceived a threat to his leadership, and unable to find agreement the NCSU leader Joseph Sturge withdrew the Union's support.

With the endorsement of the NCSU, William Sharman Crawford, MP for Rochdale and a committed Reformer and democratic suffragist, introduced his reform bill to "a small and bored House" in May 1843. The measure was lost by 101 to 32. It would be another twenty years before Parliament would seriously consider a further extension of the franchise.