

THE CHARTIST MOVEMENT 1838 – 1848

The 1848 Petition

In 1848 the British establishment watched in horror as revolution swept across Europe. On hearing this Chartist activity increased and in March there were protests and bread riots in Manchester, Glasgow and Dublin. Following this a new demonstration was planned for 10th April 1848 on Kennington Common, London and after the meeting a planned procession would carry a third petition to Parliament. A demonstration was also planned for Manchester on the same day.

This best known third petition, which proved to include many fake signatures, was the final petition presented to Parliament. The presentation of this petition came at the same time as violent changes and revolutions in many capitals of Europe, these events had given heart to the Chartist leaders whom were already encouraged by the election to Parliament in July 1847 of their most popular leader, Fergus O'Connor.

Working people had proclaimed themselves as Chartists at crowded meetings throughout March 1848 thus giving great concern to the authorities who believed the Chartists intended revolution although the Movement leaders always emphasized their commitment to peaceful protest. It was so concerning to the government that it led to Queen Victoria being dispatched to the Isle of Wight for safety. Thousands of soldiers and special constables, this also included the Duke of Wellington, were brought in to defend London.

The Government decided to ban the proposed procession with the petition to the House of Commons and brought in a statute dating to the time of Charles II that forbade more than 10 persons from presenting a petition in person. On 7th April a new legislation making certain seditious acts – (“proposing to make war against the Queen or seeking to intimidate or overawe both Houses of Parliament ” or openly speaking or writing “to that effect”) - felonies in Great Britain and Ireland punishable by death or transportation. Fergus O'Connor, the Chartist leader, complied with this ban. The reason being O'Connor knew that any confrontation with the soldiers would result in the demonstrators being killed or wounded. The petition was eventually conveyed from Kennington Common to the House of Commons by three cabs accompanied by O'Connor and the other Chartist leaders walking alongside.

No part of the Chartist petition of 1848 survives although a fragment of an earlier one does. Within two days of its presentation O'Connor was informed that the number of genuine signatures on the petition was far fewer than the six million the Chartists claimed. In 17 hours, 13 clerks had apparently counted 1.9 million signatures, O'Connor expressed scepticism that such a task could have been completed by such a small number of people in such a short time. If pseudonyms such as 'Victoria Rex' and 'No Cheese' were used, this did not necessarily mean these signatures were forgeries because for some Chartists it was necessary to keep their identities secret from employers.

The propertied classes now sought to present the Chartist petition and demonstration of 1848 as a '*fiasco*'. This was the line taken by newspapers in the days after the event and was confirmed in Charles Kingsley's 'Alton Locke' (1850). In spite of this Chartists such as Thomas Clark, who had walked alongside the cabs carrying the petition, looked back on the events of 1848 with great pride. Their intentions had been peaceful, the aggressive militarisation of the capital had been unnecessary.

Decline after 1848

Chartism as an organized movement declined rapidly after 1848 although there were pockets of support for Chartism in places such as the Black Country but the final National Convention held in 1858 was attended by only a handful of delegates

Historians of the movement blamed Chartism's decline on O'Connor's egotism and vanity but more recent historians have tended to see the process as too complex to be attributed to just one person.

In Kennington, the Brandon Estate features a large mural by Tony Hollaway, commissioned by London County Council's Edward Hollamby in the early 1960s commemorating the Chartists meeting on 10th April 1848.