

The Anti Corn Law League

The Corn Laws

The protection of agriculture meant taxes on corn in the late 18th/ early 19th century and this could appear to be in favour of Whig and Tory landlords over the rest of the community. Country labourers did not benefit from high bread prices and the landlords only represented themselves and their tenant farmers. After 1815, the attack upon the corn laws, once against the corn dealers and millers, became an attack against the comparatively small class of people accused of taking excessive profit from the ownership of land.

The landowners held a majority in parliament and the corn laws of 1804 has been described as the first attempt by a parliament of landlords to benefit themselves and their tenants from the high prices resulting from war (Napoleonic) and bad harvests between 1793 and 1801. Corn prices fell in 1814 (defeat of Napoleon and an excellent harvest in 1813. This seesawing effect on prices continued well into the middle of the 19th century.

The Main Players in the League



John Cobden 1804 - 1865

Cobden was the 4th of 11 children of a poor farmer. He saw the corn laws as morally wrong and politically damaging. He believed in free trade. He was a brilliant organizer and the League became one of the most successful 19th century pressure groups. Cobden persuaded Peel to repeal the laws and Peel paid him the tribute of saying his name, above all others, ought to be associated with the measure.

The 7 year struggle established his reputation but left him financially ruined. A public subscription was raised in 1847 and with part of the proceeds he bought the house in Sussex, where he had been born, and lived there for the rest of his life with his wife and five daughters.

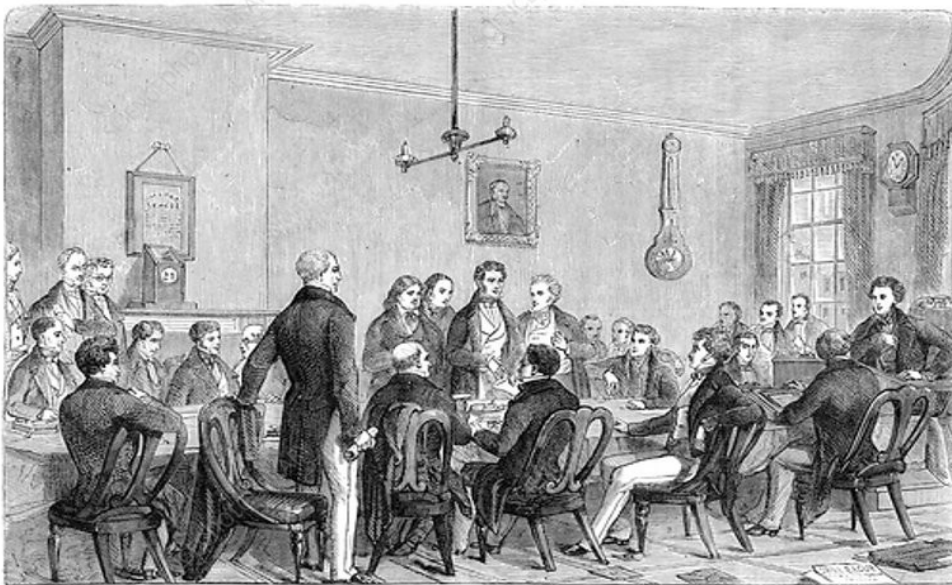
John Bright 1811 – 1889

Bright was the co-founder of the League. He tended to speak on the behalf of manufacturers and mill hands. Cobden and Bright worked well together though Bright hated being opposed, even by Cobden, and could be rather brusque if he became disappointed over something.

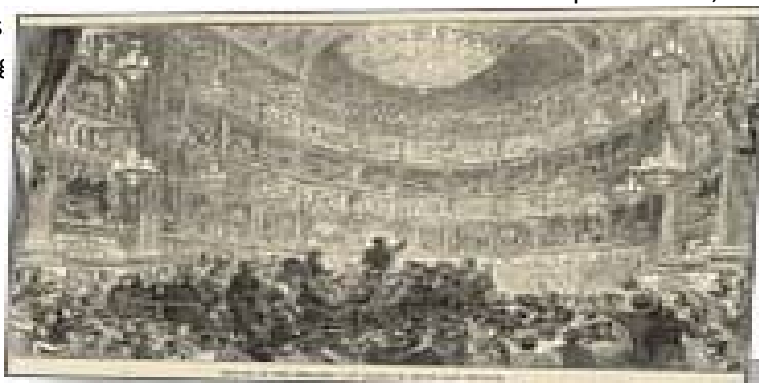
Thomas Milner Gibson 1806 – 1884

Gibson was an ardent supporter of free trade and was one of Cobden's chief allies. He became vice president of The Board of Trade from 1846 to 1848 and again from 1859 to 1866.

The Anti Corn Law League



In 1836, after a succession of bad harvests, the demand for the repeal of the corn laws began. An anti corn law league had been set up in London in 1836 but the initiative for a larger movement came from Manchester. The association was started in the autumn of 1838 when corn prices were rising. Other cities followed London's and Manchester's example. In 1839, a conference of delegates from these as well as other cities was held in Manchester. The Anti Corn Law League was formed at this conference.



Its success was due to a number of factors:

1. Its purpose was simple and easy to understand.
2. The League appealed to the desire for equality because it attacked privilege and monopoly.
3. The League appealed to the middle and working classes because it offered cheaper food.
4. It used the economic argument that imports of foreign corn would be paid for by exports of textiles and other goods.
5. It quoted biblical references against those who benefited from the hunger of the poor but their audiences knew little about agriculture and took no account of the capital that was spent on draining and fertilizing the land.
6. Cheap postage rates and cheaper transport worked to the League's advantage.

In 1842, enthusiasm for the League declined as the harvests of 1842 – 1844 were all good.

The Protectionists

The Protectionists began to answer the pamphlets and speeches of the League and some of the names that they were called eg 'titled felons', 'chawbacon', 'clodplate farmers'.

In 1842, Peel reduced import duties at the lower end of the sliding scale, so removing any temptation to keep foreign wheat out of the market.

The Protectionists also brought counter charges against the League;

- They referred to 'the mean rapacity and monopolizing spirit of merchants and manufacturers'.
- They claimed the League wanted cheap bread to save on wages.
- The League was not kind to the poor but brutally cruel towards them.

This attack was not wholly unfair and impressed the working class men who were suspicious of the middle class character of the League.

The Chartists

The Chartists were also unfriendly to the League and inclined to protection in agriculture. They believed

- Fall in prices were only good for people on fixed incomes.
- Competition from foreign corn would drive thousands of agricultural workers to join the already overcrowded labour market in towns.
- They saw the League as an attempt to divert the working class from the struggle for political rights.

Repeal of the Corn Laws

This was passed on the 25th June 1846.

'reduction of all duties on wheat, oats and barley to the nominal sum of 1 shilling a quarter' was carried after 5 months of debate.

Peel was also defeated on the same day. He resigned on the 29th June.

Summary

Each side exaggerated its own case over the repeal of the corn laws. The real threat to English agriculture came about 25 years later when the fall in the cost of transport – sea and land – brought American corn into severe competition with the British harvests.