GEORGE JULIAN HARNEY AND THE CHARTISTS AT DERBY[1]

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On 21 January 1839, George Julian Harney gave a speech to an estimated audience of 5,000 people at Chester Green in Derby. It was a notable event in the opening stages of Chartism, the working-class political movement which, in the decade between 1838 and 1848, campaigned for the achievement of the six points of the 'People's Charter'. The Charter encompassed a programme of political change which went back to at least the 1770s, and which remained unrealised two generations later, notwithstanding the passage of the Parliamentary Reform Act, or Great Reform Act, of 1832. The six points - universal male suffrage, annual parliaments, equal electoral districts, the secret ballot, the removal of property qualifications for MPs, and the payment of MPs - were designed to open up political representation to every man, regardless of social or economic status, and to make that representation as fair and accountable as possible.[2]

Harney's speech at Derby has received only occasional reference in the literature of Chartism, in spite of the fact that he was one of the most powerful orators and charismatic personalities of the movement. The purpose of this article is to place Harney's speech in its local, national and biographical contexts, relating it to the history of popular radicalism and Chartism in Derby in the decade after the 1832 Reform Act.[3]

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[1] This article is based on the Joan D'Arcy Memorial lecture, which was given at Chester Green on 21 May 2022. It opened with the tribute to Joan which I published in *DAJ*, 140 (2020), 9-10. My thanks to Adrian Perry and the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Labour History Society for inviting me to give the lecture as part of their commemoration of Harney's speech at Derby.

[2] The two best histories of Chartism remain Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists: Popular Politics in the Industrial Revolution* (1984) and Malcolm Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester, 2007).

[3] The only full-scale biography of Harney, based on meticulous research, is A.R. Schoyen, *The Chartist Challenge. A Portrait of George Julian Harney* (1958). Also see David Goodway's entries on Harney in H.C.G Matthew and Brian Harrison (editors), *Oxford Dictionary of*

In one sense, Chartism was an inevitable response to the disappointment and sense of betrayal which working people felt at the Reform Act, which failed to secure the gains which had been held out to them, and for which they had campaigned in considerable numbers. In Derby, though the act doubled the pre-1832 electorate from approximately 650 to about 1400 registered electors, the basis of qualification for the borough franchise was the possession of a house rated at £10 or more per year. In the constituency of Derby, about half of all houses reached this valuation, but they were largely in middle-class ownership. Consequently, at the 1832 General Election, Derby's electorate represented little more than 5% of its 24,000 population.[4]

The sense of bitter disappointment at the inadequacy of the Reform Act was particularly acute in Derby. The town had been one of several which had experienced serious rioting, in the aftermath of the Bill's defeat by the House of Lords in October 1831. As with the Reform Bill riots in Nottingham, events in Derby included the targeting of known anti-Reformers, and their property, both within the town and in neighbouring areas like Chaddesden and Markeaton. At Chester Green, a crowd 'attacked Mr Harrison's house…which they broke all to pieces and took his sheets and bed curtains and tied them to poles for flags'. The rioters attacked the town gaol on Nun's Green in Friargate and succeeded in releasing some of the prisoners but were repulsed at the county gaol by the governor's defensive measures. The stalls at the annual cattle fair in Derby's Market Place were also attacked. Following initial days on the part of Derby's Corporation, a curfew was imposed in the town, and it was reinforced by a detachment of 15th Hussars from Nottingham, the use of special constables, and the positioning of Javelin Men at the county gaol in Vernon Street. Three men died during the riots, including the surgeon Henry

National Biography (2004) and Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville (editors), *Dictionary of Labour History*, X (2000), 81-92.

[4] C.E. Hogarth, 'The Derbyshire Parliamentary Elections of 1832', *DAJ* (1969), 68-85.

Haden, but, unlike Nottingham, no-one was subsequently convicted for their part in the riots. However, many local households claimed compensation from the Corporation for the damage inflicted on their property.[5]

Politically, Derby was a Whig town, which was dominated by the interests of the local gentry families and the Corporation. However, its social composition had changed over the course of the past fifty years, as a result of its growing importance as a centre of manufacturing and production. It was home to a wide variety of crafts and trades, including domestic and factory workers in the silk, hosiery, and textile industry. The county's Whig Lord Lieutenant, the 6th Duke of Devonshire from Chatsworth House, enjoyed cordial relations with the Corporation – certainly better than those which existed in Nottingham between the Whig Corporation and the Ultra-Tory Duke of Newcastle. Nevertheless, local reformers in Derby were already starting to doubt whether Whig governments were any better than Tory ones, as a result of the Reform Act, and this impression intensified during the 1830s, as the ministries of Earl Grey and Viscount Melbourne passed legislation which impacted negatively upon them. Chief amongst their complaints was the Poor Law Amendment Act, or New Poor Law, of 1834, which dismantled the centuries-old system of outdoor poor relief, given in the home, and replaced it with a system of indoor relief given in workhouses. A petition from Derby against the measure gathered some 4,000 signatures.

The growing sense of class consciousness in Derby, amplified by the failure of the Reform Act and the increasingly divergent interests of capital and labour, was brought into the open during the Derby Lock-Out which took place between November 1833 and April 1834. It was only a

[5] For a first-hand account of events in Derby, see Richard A. Gaunt (editor), *Politics, Law and Society in Nottinghamshire. The Diaries of Godfrey Tallents of Newark, 1829-1839* (Nottingham, 2010). For events in Nottingham, see John Beckett, 'The Nottingham Reform Bill Riots of 1831' in *Partisan Politics, Principles and Reform in Parliament and the Constituencies, 1689-1880: Essays in Memory of John A. Phillips* (Edinburgh, 2006), 114-38.

decade since combinations or unions of working people had been legalised in Britain. The Derby Union of Operatives, the first combined trades union in the town, was established in October 1833. Within six weeks, estimates of the Union's strength varied between 800 and 1,500 members. The Lock-Out began in November 1833 after a small number of silk workers came out in support of an employee who had been sacked for refusing to pay a fine for poor workmanship at the firm of Frost and Stevenson. Union support for the dismissed worker quickly spread and, in response, some twenty employers declared their intention not to employ any member of the union. The employers maintained that 'a prompt, vigorous, and persevering resistance to the Trades' Union is absolutely necessary to protect the just rights of the masters, to preserve the commerce of the country, and to secure the true interests of the workmen themselves'. However, in their *Address to the People of Derby,* issued at Christmas 1833, the Union declared that it would 'be satisfied with the legitimate fruits of our own industry…Our object, therefore, is not to rob you, IN VIOLATION OF THE LAW – but to prevent you from further robbing us, ACCORDING TO THE LAW'.[6]

At its height, between 1,800 and 2,400 workers in a variety of trades were out on strike in Derby. Historians have noted the strong sense of common purpose and mutual support which actuated the workers and the innovative means by which they supported themselves. The equivalent of a strike fund was set up to help workers to pay their rent, and this generated donations from across the East Midlands. Co-operative workshops were set up to produce 'Derby Union Manufactory' goods, including gloves and silk, and there was a shop in Birmingham which sold them. Local barbers offered free shaves for working men, whilst the wives of striking men who became family breadwinners, showed their solidarity by refusing to sign the employer's declaration against union membership. Schoolrooms were set up on

[6] *Poor Man's Guardian,* 4 January 1834. On the Derby Lock-Out, see Harry Butterton, *Struck Out! Derby in Crisis: The Silk Mill Lock-Out, 1833-4* (Derby, 1997) and Bill Whitehead, *The Derby Lock-Out 1833-34 and the Origins of the Labour Movement* (Derby, 1999).

Bradshaw Street to provide education for the children of striking workers, at which the banner 'Union is Strength' was proudly displayed, whilst workers brought in to supply the place of those on strike were treated as 'black sheep' and publicly serenaded with rough music 'by a band…formed by various culinary utensils'.[7]

The Derby Lock-Out gained national attention, being widely reported in radical newspapers and periodicals. It also attracted a good deal of regional support. At Shrovetide 1834, some 2,000 people marched from the London Road Infirmary to a regional gathering of workers at Duffield, attended by an estimated 8,000-9,000 people. However, the Lock-Out ended in April 1834, as the striking workers were effectively forced back to work through economic necessity and the actions of the authorities. The workers could not survive on the income generated by co-operative production and declining contributions to the strike fund, whilst the government's prosecution of an agricultural labourers' union at Tolpuddle in Dorset provided a stark foretaste of what was likely to happen at Derby. The Tolpuddle Martyrs were convicted for forming a union which employed secret oaths, just like the Derby Union. This made them subject to prosecution under the Unlawful Oaths Act of 1797.[8]

It was in this context of social and political tension that the nineteen-year old George Julian Harney came to Derby in 1836, three years before his famous oration on Chester Green. Harney was born in February 1817 at Deptford in London. His father George was a sailor who had served in the transport service of the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars. Born into a life of poverty, Harney's early education was at dame schools – small, privately-run schools for young children which proliferated in the era before compulsory schooling was introduced in

[7] Michael A. Crane, 'Urban associations: class, culture and the enlightened spirit, Derby c.1700-c.1900', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, 2018, 180-92. On 'rough music', see E.P. Thompson, 'Rough music: le charivari Anglais', *Annales*, 27 (1972), 285-312.
[8] Joyce Marlow, *The Tolpuddle Martyrs* (1971); Alan Gallop, *Six for the Tolpuddle Martyrs. The Epic Struggle for Justice & Freedom* (Barnsley, 2017).

Britain – and he was clearly literate in reading and writing from an early age. Over the course of his lifetime, Harney gathered at least 2,000 books, many of which he annotated with his own comments and opinions, and read voraciously, with a particular love for the works of Lord Byron. In 1828, Harney went to the boys' naval school at Greenwich for training as a merchant seaman and went to sea in 1831. However, Harney suffered from two disadvantages as a sailor – quinsy or throat abscesses and hearing problems – and served little more than six months at sea as a cabin-boy before becoming shop boy to the London radical and publisher Henry Hetherington.[9]

Hetherington was one of the leading figures in the National Union of the Working Classes, formed in 1831, which campaigned for parliamentary reform on the basis of several of the points which later formed part of the People's Charter. Harney joined the organisation in 1833, by which time he was fully engaged in Hetherington's battle for a free and unstamped press. Harney's lifelong love of the written word, and his appreciation of its power as a tool of education and political enlightenment, made him wholly committed to Hetherington's journal, *The Poor Man's Guardian,* which was the most popular of the unstamped periodicals. Its masthead proudly proclaimed that it was 'A Weekly Paper for the People. Published in defiance of the law to try the power of right against might'.[10]

To be legal, all newspapers had to pay the government stamp or duty, which signified it had been taxed appropriately. But such 'taxes on knowledge' raised the cover price of newspapers considerably. For example, the *Derby and Chesterfield Reporter*, which supported the Whigs,

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[9] For a brief biography, see David Goodway (editor), *George Julian Harney, The Chartists were Right. Selections from the Newcastle Weekly Chronicle, 1890-97* (2014), 9-26. For Harney's bibliomania, see David Goodway, 'The Métivier collection and the books of George Julian Harney', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History,* 49 (1984), 57-60; Margaret Hambrick, *A Chartist's Library* (1986).

[10] See the four-volume edition of *The Poor Man's Guardian, 1831-1835* (1969), with an introduction by Patricia Hollis.

cost seven pence, of which four pence was accounted for by government duty. A vigorous unstamped press operated in defiance of the tax but was always at the mercy of prosecution by the Stamp Office and its informers; some 500 individuals were imprisoned for selling the *Poor Man's Guardian* during its existence between 1831 and 1835. Harney, who had already served two terms of imprisonment for selling unstamped newspapers, was sent to Derby, where the *Guardian* sold well, to assist in bringing untaxed knowledge to the people. As he subsequently observed:

> The liberty of the press once established, a new age will commence, the standard of truth and science will be erected among the nations of the world, and…we may contemplate, with heartfelt satisfaction, the establishment of the dignified empire of reason and the improvement and happiness of the human race.[11]

Harney was unable to evade detection in Derby for long and, in February 1836, was prosecuted for selling a newspaper which did not publish the name and address of the printer, as required by the Newspaper Publication Act of 1798. According to Harney's own account, he was 'dragged from my home without the least notice and consigned to a dungeon by the magistrates of Derby', serving six months in prison rather than paying the £20 fine. Later in the year, the government reduced the newspaper duty to one penny, but intensified its prosecution of the remaining unstamped newspapers.[12]

On his release from prison, Harney returned to London, where he associated with veteran political radicals including Allen Davenport, a supporter of Thomas Spence's ideas for nationalisation of the land. Together with Davenport and the republican Charles Neesom,

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[11] Schoyen, *Chartist Challenge,* 6. Also see Joel H. Wiener, *The War of the Unstamped: The Movement to Repeal the British Newspaper Tax, 1830-1836* (New York, 1969).
[12] Dorothy Thompson (editor), *The Early Chartists* (1971), 184-6; *Derby Mercury*, 24 February 1836.

Harney helped to form the East London Democratic Association (ELDA) in 1837. The Association campaigned for a democratic republic upon the principles of the French Revolution of 1789 and Thomas Paine's classic republican text, *The Rights of Man*. The Association, which found support amongst many distressed communities of workers, including the Spitalfields silk weavers, was something of a rival to the London Working Men's Association (or LWMA), which was established in June 1836 by a group of campaigners including William Lovett and Harney's old employer, Hetherington. It was this organisation which drafted the People's Charter in May 1838. From the outset, the LWMA targeted its support upon moderate and educated working people, stressing peaceful petitioning, gradual persuasion, and alliances with sympathetic radical MPs. They strenuously opposed any talk of violent insurrection or the threat of intimidation to achieve their ends.[13]

These two rival organisations exemplified the division between exponents of physical force and moral persuasion within Chartism. This division has sometimes been over-emphasised, in that it conceals the underlying principles which united different elements of the working class in support of political change. However, the early years of Chartism, and Harney's part in the movement, clearly reveal the difference in tactics and rhetoric between them.

Harney reluctantly joined the LWMA in October 1837, but immediately came into conflict with its leadership. He remained unconvinced of the wisdom of associating with MPs who did not demonstrate a wholescale commitment to the cause of the working man. His particular target was Daniel O'Connell, the Irish radical and MP known as 'The Liberator' because of his role in helping to secure Catholic Emancipation in 1829. Harney attacked O'Connell, in a correspondence which was published in *The Times,* for his attitude towards the Glasgow Cotton

[13] See Jennifer Bennett, 'The London Democratic Association 1837-41: A Study in London Radicalism' in James Epstein and Dorothy Thompson (editors), *The Chartist Experience. Studies in Working-Class Radicalism and Culture, 1830-1860* (1982), 87-119.

Spinners Union, which had gone on strike in defence of their wages in July and August 1837. The leadership of the union was subsequently tried on charges of conspiracy, the taking of oaths, and attacks on blacklegs or 'knobs', and were sentenced to seven years' transportation. Harney thought O'Connell unsympathetic to trades unions in general and the cotton spinners in particular and said as much in print. However, the LWMA passed a vote of censure on Harney, for speaking in their name without approval, and Harney subsequently quit the organisation.[14]

Returning to his roots, Harney became Secretary to the newly re-formed London Democratic Association, which was launched in the same period as the People's Charter. Its radical programme helped to gain it some 3,000 members, largely in east London and districts south of the River Thames. The Association's belief that peaceful petitioning must be accompanied by a willingness to procure and bear arms was summed up in its legend - 'He that hath no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one'.[15]

Chartism employed the same repertoire of tactics which had been used by earlier reform movements – association, discussion, propaganda, and petitioning, being chief amongst them. During the 1790s, British reformers had elected delegates from different parts of the country to assemble in a Convention, in order to discuss strategy and tactics, and this was a technique which the Chartists revived. They convened a General Convention of the Industrious Classes, to meet in London on 4 February 1839, at which to discuss a grand national petition, a fund-raising and publicity campaign, and such 'ulterior measures' as might be necessary if the petition was rejected by parliament. The Convention also provided an opportunity for gauging the strength of support for the different tactics proposed for achieving the Charter. Given its established strength in London, the LWMA ensured that it dominated the selection of delegates

[14] See *The Times*, 13 February 1838.
[15] Bennett, 'East London'; David Goodway, *London Chartism 1838-1848* (Cambridge, 1982).

for the Metropolis, whilst advocates of moral persuasion were also in the ascendant at Birmingham and Edinburgh. However, beyond London, and particularly in the Midlands and the North of England, advocates of physical force were much stronger.[16]

As one of the recognised exponents of this strategy and someone who was 'soaked in the French revolutionary tradition', Harney was in high demand as a provincial delegate. In October 1838, he was invited to represent Norwich at the Convention. In his acceptance speech, Harney observed that people 'had petitioned too long, they had prayed too long, they now demanded. They would have the Charter or die in the attempt to obtain it...Petitioning had always failed unless the people backed their petitions by *arguments* not to be misunderstood'. The Northern Political Union, based in Northumberland and Cumberland, was another survivor of the campaign to achieve the 1832 Reform Act. In the autumn of 1838, it also invited Harney to become their delegate at the Convention. It was the start of a long-standing connection between Harney and the centre of Northern radicalism, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. At Christmas 1838, he accepted their nomination at a public meeting which was attended by an estimated 60,000-80,000 people. Harney was in high favour because, as he had recently proclaimed, he had 'sworn the oath of a democrat…To live free or die'.[17]

The third invitation which Harney received to act as a delegate came from Derby. A Working Men's Association had been founded in the town in November 1838 by craftsmen including textile workers, forgers, and millwrights. It built upon the experience which had been gained during the Lock-Out, three years before. Given Harney's previous connection with the town, Derby could claim him as one of their own. Having spent the period since leaving Newcastle on an extensive tour of Lancashire and Yorkshire, Harney arrived in Derby on 21 January 1839.

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[16] Long-term continuities in the programme and strategies of reformers are stressed in Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Rethinking Chartism', in his *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983).
[17] Schoyen, *Chartist Challenge,* 38, 40, 44.

A week later, he attended the meeting on Chester Green at which his selection as a delegate to the Chartist National Convention was confirmed. The local authorities enrolled over three dozen special constables, in case of disturbance, but the event passed off peacefully. Chester Green was chosen as the venue as an open piece of common land outside the borough's boundaries. In subsequent years, it was to provide a suitable venue for Chartist gatherings, given the Corporation's frequent ban on meetings in the Town Hall. [18]

The Chester Green meeting was attended by a strong contingent of workers from Belper – a fact which the Tory *Derby Mercury* thought highly significant. In its coverage of events, the *Mercury* argued that Derby people were far less interested in Chartism than in-comers from surrounding towns and villages. Belper's radicalism is certainly evident in this period – some of the participants in the ill-fated Pentrich Rebellion of 1817 migrated to the town, following evictions by the Duke of Devonshire's agents in the 1820s. In succeeding years, the town's Working Men's Association regularly met in Belper Market Place, whilst the newly built workhouse was burned in October 1841, with the crowd threatening anyone who attempted to save the building from destruction.[19]

According to one local Chartist, Harney's 'reception in Derby, even in hitherto apathetic, degraded, priest-ridden Derby', was 'most enthusiastic' and had roused the people from 'a slavish sleep'.[20] As one might expect, Harney used the opportunity provided by his election as the Derby delegate to the Chartist convention, to reinforce his principal messages, as one of the leading advocates of 'physical force' Chartism. Having been imprisoned in Derby three

[18] All subsequent quotations from Harney's speech come from the account in *Northern Star,* 9 February 1839; also see *Derby Mercury,* 13 February 1839; Thompson, *Early Chartists,* 184-7.

[19] *Derby Mercury,* 30 January 1839; *Northern Star,* 9 February 1839, 17 April, 24 July, 28 August, 9 October, 27 November 1841; Rosemary Key, 'An Assessment of the Chartist Movement in Derby: 1839-1842', *Derbyshire Miscellany,* 16 (2002), 62-4. I am grateful to Julian Atkinson and Roger Tanner for their insights on Belper radicalism.

[20] Schoyen, *Chartist Challenge,* 50.

years before for selling an unstamped newspaper, Harney took special pains to castigate the town's aristocratic patrons and what he called its 'shopocracy', or middle class, for their sneering attitude towards Chartism:

> I tell these big-bellied, purse-proud, ignorant Shopocrats, to look to their tills – to stick to their counters – to fawn and crawl, and to creep to their aristocratic patrons, but not to sneer at us, who have too long borne with their sneers.

Harney went on to suggest that the problem of overpopulation, beloved by the followers of Reverend Thomas Malthus, might easily be resolved if the unproductive classes of aristocrats and 'moneymongers' were removed from the country:

> They say we are too many – that population increases faster than the means of subsistence. If so, let those leave the land who do not labour – let those who work not leave the country, and when the Aristocracy betake themselves to Van Diemen's Land, and the moneymongers to the devil, take my word for it there will be enough for you and me.

Harney took particular trouble to defend the Chartists from the charge of being interested in confiscating other people's property. Using the analogy of a bedstead 'full of nasty, filthy, crawling Aristocratic and Shopocratic bugs', Harney maintained that 'we will not destroy the bedstead, but *we will annihilate the bugs*'. He followed up the analogy in verse:

> If bugs molest me as in bed I lie,
>
> Shall I desert my bed for them? Not I,
>
> I will arise, and every bug destroy,
>
> Now make my bed and all its sweets enjoy.

Turning to the Chartists' ultimate ambition, universal suffrage, Harney argued that it was the means of bringing:

> freedom to our country, and happiness to our homesteads: we believe it will give us bread, and beef, and beer. What is it that we want? Not to destroy property and take life, but to preserve our own lives, and to protect our own property – namely, our Labour.

He also left his audience in no doubt of the consequences which would ensue if parliament rejected the petition in support of the People's Charter:

> Universal suffrage there shall be – or our tyrants will find to their cost that we will have universal misery… We will make our country one vast, howling wilderness of desolation and destruction rather than the tyrants shall carry out their infernal system. I have given you to understand that the men of the north are armed. I invite you to follow their example… Believe me, there is no argument like the sword – and the musket is unanswerable.

The Chester Green speech provides compelling evidence for G.D.H. Cole's view that Harney was the '*enfant terrible'* of the Chartist movement. He was a man who consciously modelled himself on the French revolutionary politician and self-proclaimed 'Friend of the People' Jean Paul Marat. Harney wore a red cap of liberty and a tricolour sash at this time, the better to reflect his devotion to French revolutionary principles.[21]

Whilst we lack many visual illustrations of Harney, we have a number of contemporary descriptions of his appearance and demeanour at the time he spoke in Derby. Harney was described as 'a slender, intense man with rather delicate features, plainly-marked dark brows,

[21] G.D.H. Cole, *Chartist Portraits* (1941), 268.

and brown hair, worn long in the fashion of the time'. He had a 'ruddy complexion, [was] of medium height, [and with] grey eyes'. Those eyes 'were never at rest, but constantly changing from one object to another, as though he distrusted all around him'. Harney, who did not marry until September 1840, was a popular figure with the many women who attended Chartist meetings, not least because of his support for their active role in the movement. Only a few weeks before his appearance at Chester Green, he openly encouraged, and directly associated himself with, the newly formed female branch of the Northern Political Union, which was established to campaign for the Charter.[22]

Harney was one of seventy delegates who gathered in London for the Chartist Convention in February 1839. Derby's other delegate was John Skevington, a Primitive Methodist preacher from Nottingham with a long history of activism in the co-operative movement at Loughborough. Harney quickly became disillusioned with the indecisiveness of the Convention and its lack of appreciation for physical force tactics. In April, Harney's friends in the London Democratic Association launched a new publication, the *London Democrat,* to campaign for a radical programme of action including a run on the banks and an armed march on London. In May, Harney went on a tour of the provinces to generate support for militant action.[23]

Meanwhile in Derby, a meeting of the Working Men's Association passed a vote of confidence in the Chartist Convention in April. A subsequent Whitsun meeting, attended by between 400 and 500 people, expressed support for the 'ulterior measures' proposed by the Convention in the event that the petition was rejected. However, the basic dilemma remained over the nature of those measures, and the likely support which would be generated for them. In July, the

[22] Schoyen, *Chartist Challenge,* 46-47; Cole, *Chartist Portraits*, 298-299.
[23] P.A. Smith, 'Chartists in Loughborough', *Leicestershire Historian,* 2 (1975), 27-31; Schoyen, *Chartist Challenge,* 54-67.

Chartist Convention reconvened in Birmingham. A few days into its deliberations, there were serious riots at the Bull Ring, which were still fresh in the minds of MPs when they rejected the Chartist petition on 12 July 1839 by 235 votes to 46.[24]

The Chartist petition had generated some 1.2 million signatures, of which at least 8,000 came from Derby – representing about one in five people living in the town at this time. Three days after parliament rejected the petition, a meeting at Derby offered its support for a programme of armed defence. This was an open act of defiance given the government's earlier proclamation against arms and drilling. However, the rejection of the petition brought into sharp relief the inability of the Chartists to agree a co-ordinated response to parliament's actions. The favoured solution – a 'Grand National Holiday' or 'Sacred Month' – amounting to a full-scale withdrawal of labour in a nationwide strike, had gained most support. However, plans for such action were finally rejected by the Chartist leadership on 6 August and the Chartist Convention dissolved a month later.[25]

However, the possibility of more militant action was demonstrated a few months later when a group of Chartist rebels took part in the Newport Rising in South Wales. Not for the first time, the rebels, many of whom were local miners, became convinced that they were part of a national rising which would draw strength from the Midlands and the North of England. By the end of the rising, fourteen people had been killed, fifty were wounded, and over one hundred arrests had been made. In January 1840, three of the men were convicted of High Treason for their part in the Rising, although their death sentences were commuted to transportation.[26]

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[24] Key, 'Chartist Movement', 64-66.
[25] Thompson, *The Chartists,* 348.
[26] See David J.V. Jones, *The Last Rising: The Newport Chartist Insurrection of 1839* (Cardiff, 1999).

It might reasonably be asked whether Harney had magnified the possibilities for physical force, during this period, and whether the fate of the Newport rebels had all too clearly demonstrated it. The leading historian of Chartism, Dorothy Thompson, has observed that:

> Harney himself in many of his speeches suggest[s] not a people arming to protect themselves against a violent and repressive government, but a revolutionary people, prepared to rise in support of their demands.

However, she goes on to note that there was scarcely a leader 'who remained prominent in 1838 and 1839 in whose speeches and writings there appears no suggestion of a recourse to arms'. To that extent, Harney was 'very much borne along by the tide of popular feeling at this time', rather than leading it.[27]

When the Chartist Convention met at Birmingham, in May 1839, Harney had spoken in his usual refrain, but he was subsequently acquitted by a Warwickshire Grand Jury from the charge of having made a seditious speech. However, when Robert Gammage published the first history of the Chartist movement in the 1850s, he inclined to the view that Harney, who was still in his early twenties, was a young man in a hurry. For Gammage, Harney was:

> little past his minority, a very dangerous time of life for a man even of the strongest mind to be elevated to greatness…many men of respectable talents fall into the mistake of supposing themselves to be greater than they really are, and from this weakness Harney was not free.[28]

Although Gammage's view of physical force Chartists was 'consistently hostile and unflattering', it is certainly the case that Harney had set himself up as one of the leaders of the more militant wing of the movement. However, as he freely acknowledged, several years later,

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[27] Thompson, *Early Chartists*, 19-21.
[28] Quoted in Cole, *Chartist Portraits,* 298.

he lacked the qualities required to lead Chartism. In 1846, he told Friedrich Engels that 'a popular chief should be possessed of a magnificent bodily appearance, an iron frame, eloquence, or at least a ready fluency of tongue. I have none of these. O'Connor has them all – at least in degree'.[29]

Though we might question Harney's self-deprecation, there is little doubting his estimate of Feargus O'Connor who increasingly assumed prominence as the recognised leader of Chartism during the 1840s. O'Connor was known as 'The Lion of Freedom' and Harney knew him well, having worked together since 1837. A highly charismatic figure, O'Connor created an influential platform for his views by establishing *The Northern Star* newspaper at Leeds in 1837. This quickly became the recognised organ of Chartism. Like Harney, O'Connor built a strong personal following in the Midlands and the North of England, and like Harney served time in prison for his principles, completing an eighteen months' sentence in York Castle for seditious libel after the Newport Rising. A meeting at Derby called on Queen Victoria to offer a free pardon to O'Connor, but to no avail. Whilst O'Connor was frequently described as the leader of physical force Chartism, he did not support violent insurrection, like Harney, but favoured force of numbers, as demonstrated in mass petitioning and public meetings.[30]

O'Connor's strategy was endorsed by the formation of the National Charter Association (NCA) at Manchester in July 1840. Within two years, it had an estimated 40,000 members. The NCA sought to co-ordinate Chartist activity by way of a central organisation. It favoured the calling of mass public meetings and the passing of Chartist resolutions, as well as disrupting public

[29] John Saville, *1848. The British State and the Chartist Movement* (Cambridge, 1987), 203; Frank Gees Black and Renee Métivier Black (editors), *The Harney Papers* (Assen, Netherlands, 1969), 241.
[30] See James Epstein, *Lion of Freedom: Feargus O'Connor and the Chartist Movement, 1832-42* (1982) and Paul A. Pickering, *Feargus O'Connor. A Political Life* (2008); Crane, 'Urban associations', 199-200; Key, 'Chartist Movement', 65.

meetings called by other groups at which Chartist resolutions could be adopted. A good example of this strategy occurred at Derby in January 1842. A meeting was called to pass an address of congratulation to the Queen on the birth of the Prince of Wales. Some 200 Chartists disrupted the meeting and forced the organisers to reconvene elsewhere, but not before proposing a counter-resolution:

> There are thousands of virtuous women, Your Majesty's subjects, enjoying the same natural extremity upon beds of straw, without even a pillow whereon to lay their heads, or sustenance to support them; that we attribute that state of things to class legislation... we, therefore, pray your Majesty to advise your Ministers to pass a law for a total repeal of all laws that have a tendency to rob the millions for the benefit of the few.[31]

These methods became increasingly important during the 1840s, as Chartism competed with the campaign to repeal the Corn Laws. Some Chartist sympathisers, like Joseph Sturge, supported a strategic alliance with the Anti-Corn Law movement, but others saw this as a needless diversion and were suspicious of the motives behind the Anti-Corn Law campaign. The well-established connection between the price of bread and the level of wages suggested a degree of self-interest on the part of the middle-class activists who vigorously supported repeal.[32]

These tensions were evident in Derby, where an Anti-Corn Law meeting was held in March 1840. Chartists disrupted another meeting, held in the town in January 1842, but did little to dampen support for the campaign. A Derby Anti-Corn Law petition gathered an estimated 6,000 signatures during 1842, and the leaders of the Anti-Corn Law League, Richard Cobden, and John Bright, visited the town on three separate occasions between 1842 and 1845. To mark

[31] *Northern Star*, 29 January 1842; Key, 'Chartist Movement', 68.
[32] Alex Tyrrell, *Joseph Sturge and the Moral Radical Party in Early Victorian Britain* (1987).

their dissatisfaction with the modifications to the Corn Laws proposed by Sir Robert Peel's Conservative government in February 1842, a crowd estimated at 8,000-10,000 strong marched by torchlight to the Market Place and burnt an effigy of the prime minister. The following year, the Derby Anti-Corn Law Association was established, with approximately 2,500 members. Its President was Joseph Strutt; seven years earlier, he had been Mayor of Derby when Harney was imprisoned for selling unstamped newspapers in the town.[33]

During the same period, the National Charter Association was also gathering local support. There were two separate branches of the NCA in Derby by 1841, and nearly 400 membership cards were issued before October 1842. Local activity centred on the *Northern Star* public house in Devonshire Street – the name of which gave a clear enough signal of support for O'Connor's strategy and leadership. Branches of the Association met in Derby on Sundays and Monday evenings, but, as previously, fought to secure suitable venues at which to gather in large numbers.[34]

Throughout the spring and summer of 1841, support for Chartist principles was maintained by a series of Sunday morning sermons and funeral orations, which were given by Chartist lecturers or 'missionaries', speaking in the Market Place. The first of these, given by Jonathan Bairstow, was a sermon on the death of the Sheffield Chartist John Clayton, who had recently died in Nottingham gaol. Some 500 people assembled to hear the sermon, which ended with a financial subscription for Clayton's widow. Local informers reported that Bairstow had proclaimed 'the day and hour is at hand when there must be a mortally Bloody Revolution'.

[33] Crane, Urban associations', 210-211; Key, 'Chartist Movement', 69.
[34] Crane, 'Urban associations', 199. James Epstein cautions against equating support for Chartism with 'counting dues-paying members': James Epstein, 'Some Organisational and Cultural Aspects of the Chartist Movement in Nottingham', in Epstein and Thompson, *The Chartist Experience*, 229.

However, whilst Bairstow had Harney's gift for a dramatic turn of phrase, the local authorities maintained a watching brief rather than ban these gatherings.[35]

O'Connor himself visited Derby in February 1842. He was greeted at the Midland Station by about 1,000 people, a band of musicians from Holbrook, and the flying of the Chartist green flag, and went on to speak at the Royal Hotel (Brunswick Street). He was in Derby again in May, a fortnight after Parliament rejected the second Chartist petition by 287 to 49 votes. The petition, organised by the National Charter Association and closely associated with O'Connor, had gathered nearly three times as many signatures as the one presented in 1839, but was given short shrift by MPs.[36]

Attention now turned to organised strike action. Like much of the rest of the country, Derby was enduring a period of sustained economic distress in the years 1841 and 1842. A relief fund, which generated some £1,500 in public subscriptions, was used to support approximately 10,000 men, women, and children, with bread and soup, in the early months of 1841. The following year, the town was described as 'one of the most riotous, revolutionary, disunited towns in all England…noted for bitterness, and strife, and party violence'.[37]

During July and August 1842, the imposition of wage cuts in the Lancashire mills led to a series of strikes and disturbances known as the 'Plug Riots', after workers took the plugs out of the boilers of steam engines to prevent them from working. Chartists attempted to co-ordinate activity with the striking workers, as an opportunity to advance their cause. Harney, who had settled in Sheffield the year before, did not think the riots would be sufficient to

[35] These events are covered in a bound volume of manuscript papers held in Derby Local Studies Library, Ba 909, Mss 16186, relating to 'The Chartist Movement in Derby, 1841'.
[36] See the reports in *Derby Mercury,* 22 February, 19 May, 16 June 1842.
[37] Crane, Urban associations', 198, 206.

achieve the Charter - only a general insurrection would accomplish real change, but there was insufficient evidence of support to think it likely to happen.[38]

At Derby, attempts to bring the workers out in solidarity took place in August. On the 16th, the Chartist orator, John West, spoke to a crowd of some 2,000 people in the Market Place, under the chairmanship of local shoemaker John Moss, whilst workers from outlying villages like Duffield attempted to bring the unemployed knitters out on strike. As in 1839, Belper men marched to Chester Green where they were fed bread and cheese. Many years later, one Derby resident recalled his horror at seeing 'the appearance in Friar Gate of long processions of ill-dressed, half-starved people, headed by men carrying upon poles loaves of bread dripped in blood obtained from the slaughter houses'.[39]

On the 18th, a meeting of Chartists and unionists took place at Chester Green, having been banned from the town. The Chartist lecturer John West opposed a resort to physical force measures and declared a commitment to 'Peace, Law and Order', but the meeting agreed on strike action from the following weekend, and a mass gathering to take place on Holbrook Moor on Monday 22 August. However, the authorities mustered on the Moor in force, using the yeomanry cavalry, hussars, and militia to prevent a meeting at the scheduled time. A group of several hundred colliers managed to assemble around lunchtime on the 22nd, but whilst they made some attempts to rally support in Derby, everyone had returned to work by the following day. Meanwhile, in the aftermath of the Plug Riots, 58 Chartists were arrested on counts of conspiracy and sedition. Their number included Harney, who was found guilty at Lancaster in March 1843, but his conviction was overturned on a technicality.[40]

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[38] See Mick Jenkins, *General Strike of 1842* (1980); Schoyen, *Chartist Challenge,* 112-121.
[39] *Derby and Chesterfield Reporter,* 18 August 1842; Crane, 'Urban associations', 206-207.
[40] Key, 'Chartist Movement', 69-71; Schoyen, *Chartist Challenge,* 122-123; *The trial of Feargus O'Connor, Esq., barrister-at-law, and fifty-eight others at Lancaster on a charge of sedition, conspiracy, tumult, and riot* (New York, 1970 edition).

Although Chartism continued for several years after 1843, Harney increasingly moved away from Derby's orbit. He settled in Leeds, where he met Engels and became sub-editor of the *Northern Star* before moving to London to continue his work on the newspaper in 1844. He succeeded O'Connor as editor a year later. Though he subsequently split from O'Connor in 1850, Harney bought the *Northern Star*, when it was sold in 1852, and merged it with his own periodical, *The Friend of the People*, to form a new if short-lived title, *The Star of Freedom*. Harney's time was increasingly devoted to fostering close connections with European radicals. In March 1846, he became Secretary of the British section of the Society of Fraternal Democrats, one of a number of like-minded organisations which sprang up in the years before the European Revolutions of 1848. This brought him into close contact with Socialist thinkers like Ernest Jones, who was increasingly competing with O'Connor for the leadership of Chartism, and Karl Marx. All three men were in Paris in the month that Revolution broke out in France.[41]

On 10 April 1848, Harney represented Nottingham as their delegate at the Chartist Convention on Kennington Common in London, the prelude to the presentation of the third Chartist petition to Parliament. The delegate for Derby was Harney's fellow journalist G.W.M. Reynolds, who observed that the town was 'tired of petitioning [-] recourse must be had to physical force'. The failure of the Kennington Common meeting, and the rejection of the third Chartist petition, led to changes within the organisation and leadership of the National Charter Association, although Harney continued to be involved with the organisation until 1852.[42]

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[41] Goodway, *The Chartists Were Right,* 12-17; Saville, *1848,* 57, 86. For Harney's work with the Democratic Committee for Poland's Regeneration, see Fabrice Bensimon, 'Au coeur d'une association politique le registre du comité démocratique pour la renaissance de la Pologne (Londres, 1846-1847)', *Revue d'histoire du XIX siècle,* 62 (2021), 230-249.

[42] *Derby Mercury,* 5 April 1848; Anne Humpherys, *G.W.M. Reynolds: Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press* (2019).

A year after the meeting at Kennington Common, Harney observed, rather wearily, that 'after so many years of reform and Chartist agitation, multitudes of men whose very interest would benefit by the triumph of Chartism are as yet ignorant of or indifferent to the Charter'. Over the course of the next three years, he launched and re-launched a series of periodicals, *The Democratic Review, The Red Republican,* and *The Friend of the People,* in which he put forward his philosophy of fraternal co-operation between international republicans and democrats. In November 1850, only a month after resigning as editor of the *Northern Star,* Harney published the first English translation of the Communist Manifesto in *The Red Republican* and, two months later, with Ernest Jones, launched a programme of radical reform which encompassed nationalisation of the land, the repudiation of the National Debt, and a system of public welfare for the unemployed.[43]

After returning to Newcastle-upon-Tyne for two years, Harney commenced a long voluntary absence from England in 1855. He settled in Jersey, where he lived and worked for the next eight years, before emigrating to the United States of America. Here he became clerk at the Massachusetts State House in Boston and edited a periodical, *The Commonwealth.* He continued his journalistic career with contributions to the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* well into his seventies and gave a large donation of books to Newcastle's public library. Harney finally returned to England in 1888 and passed the final decade of his life at Richmond in Surrey, being nursed through ill-health by his second wife, Marie. He was presented with a testimonial fund of £200 a few weeks before his death, on 9 December 1897, and was remembered as the last surviving member of the Chartist Convention of 1839.[44]

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[43] Crane, 'Urban associations', 214; see the reprints of *The Democratic Review* (1968) and *The Red Republican and Friend of the People,* 2 vols (1966).

[44] For Harney's later life and views, see Goodway, *The Chartists Were Right,* 12-26; Schoyen, *Chartist Challenge,* 171-287; *The Harney Library: List of Books (Mainly Political) Presented by Mr and Mrs G.J. Harney, and Placed in the Reference Department* (Newcastle, 1899).

As this article has argued, whilst men like Harney have sometimes been disregarded as 'extreme' or 'militant' voices within the Chartist movement of the 1830s and 1840s, they were nevertheless important in channelling opinion at crucial moments in the campaign for democratic political change. Harney's speech at Chester Green in January 1839 came at an interesting moment of conjunction, not only in his own life, and in that of the Chartist movement, but in the evolution of Derby as a town with a large and active working class. The competing claims made by advocates of physical force and moral persuasion in Chartism were reflective of wider debates in early-nineteenth century society about the extent and nature of social change and the degree to which it should be embraced, accommodated, or resisted.

Chartists saw the resolution of their ills in a parliamentary system which placed no barriers in the way of entry to working people. It was a political movement, but one affected by the experience of profound social and economic change. Nor, for all his distrust of the parliamentary system created by the 1832 Reform Act, was Harney above putting himself forward for election to Parliament. He stood for the West Riding of Yorkshire in 1841 and challenged the foreign secretary, Viscount Palmerston, at Tiverton in Devon in 1847. However, for Harney, these were opportunities to play to his strengths as a platform orator, by proclaiming Chartist sentiments on the election hustings and denouncing Whig ministers, rather than serious efforts to secure his return as an MP.[45] By contrast, at Derby, a Chartist candidate, Philip McGrath, obtained about ten per cent of the vote in the General Election of 1847, whilst Feargus O'Connor was returned as the only Chartist MP, being returned for Nottingham in the same contest. Appropriately enough, whilst Harney represented Nottingham at Kennington Common in April 1848, it was McGrath who chaired the Convention. It was a

[45] Schoyen, *Chartist Challenge,* 107-9, 149-53; F.J. Snell, *Palmerston's Borough* (1894), 77-88; *The Times,* 29-31 July 1847.

fitting reminder of Derby's commitment to the Chartist movement and its continued support for the principles of the People's Charter.[46]

[46] Crane, 'Urban associations', 211-12; Saville, *1848,* 103; Che Binder, 'The Nottingham Electorate and the Election of the Chartist, Feargus O'Connor, 1847', *Transactions of the Thoroton Society,* 107 (2003).