

## The Political protest in London, 1750–1900

Between 1750 and 1900, London's role as the capital and political heart of the nation and empire made it a focus for campaigners and protestors. As campaigners became more organised and vocal they became more effective in influencing political change. Radical thinkers who wanted political and social change printed pamphlets, journals, illustrations and books to spread their ideas. Demonstrators gathered in large open spaces such as Kennington Common, Trafalgar Square and Hyde Park. These mass meetings and rallies sometimes caused confrontation and violence, which threatened social order.

Society was divided into three main classes (social groups). At the top was the upper class, or the ruling class. They had inherited their wealth, land, and social and political power from their families. At the bottom end was the working class. Ranging from unskilled labourers to skilled workers and tradesmen, they relied solely on their jobs to survive. Historically, they had no political power. The middle classes worked for a living, and even though some were relatively wealthy as they owned businesses or were professionals such as bankers and lawyers, they held little political power in the 1750s.

### What were the Gordon Riots?

In 1780, a law was passed giving greater equality to Catholics, including lifting the ban on joining the army. A Member of Parliament, Lord Gordon, tried to force the government to withdraw it. He gave rousing speeches at mass rallies and incited (stirred up) Protestants to acts of violence. Rioters attacked anyone who was suspected of being Catholic, burned down houses and destroyed their businesses.

This door from Newgate prison became a symbol of protest. The prison was meant to be escape proof. However, some of the rioters managed to break the door down with sledgehammers and crowbars and took control of the prison as part of their siege of the city. These were the Gordon Riots.

For six days London was ungovernable. Eventually the army was brought in to restore order. Around 700 rioters were killed, including 21 who were publicly executed.



**Newgate prison  
door, 1780**

The future poet and artist **William Blake** was in the crowd that broke into Newgate prison.

## What was the Cato Street conspiracy?

This axe was specifically commissioned to execute the Cato Street conspirators.

These were a group of Londoners who did not agree with the way the government was ruling England. They wanted **revolution** (dramatic political change). They planned to murder Members of Parliament (MPs) and to parade through the slums of London with their heads on poles.

On the night of 22 February 1820, the conspirators met in a flat in Cato Street. Nearby was Grosvenor Square in central London, where they wrongly assumed several of the MPs were dining.

But, government spies had **infiltrated** (joined in disguise) their group and **tipped off** (warned) the police. So before they could do anything, police burst into the flat. One of the spies shouted, 'We are peace officers. Lay down your arms', but an officer was killed as the conspirators tried to escape.

The five ringleaders were arrested immediately and publicly executed for high treason outside Newgate prison.



Axe made for the execution of the Cato Street conspirators, 1820

This axe was never used. The conspirators were hanged and then decapitated using a knife rather than this axe.

## What was the Chartist movement?

This truncheon was carried by James Mabey, a **special constable**, or volunteer police officer, stationed at the Houses of Parliament during the Chartist protests of 1848.

The Chartist movement was led by a group of working class men, including William Cuffay, whose father had been an enslaved African. They wrote the 'People's Charter' in 1838 demanding the right to vote for all men and that parliament be run more fairly.



Special constable's truncheon, 1848

In April 1848, they organised a rally in south east London. Expecting trouble, the government recruited 150,000 special constables armed with truncheons. However, the 50,000 crowd dispersed peacefully. Afterwards, a small group of Chartists peacefully marched through London to deliver a petition, which had been signed by about two million people.

Although the Chartist movement was unsuccessful at getting the voting system changed, it did get many working class people interested and involved in politics for the first time.

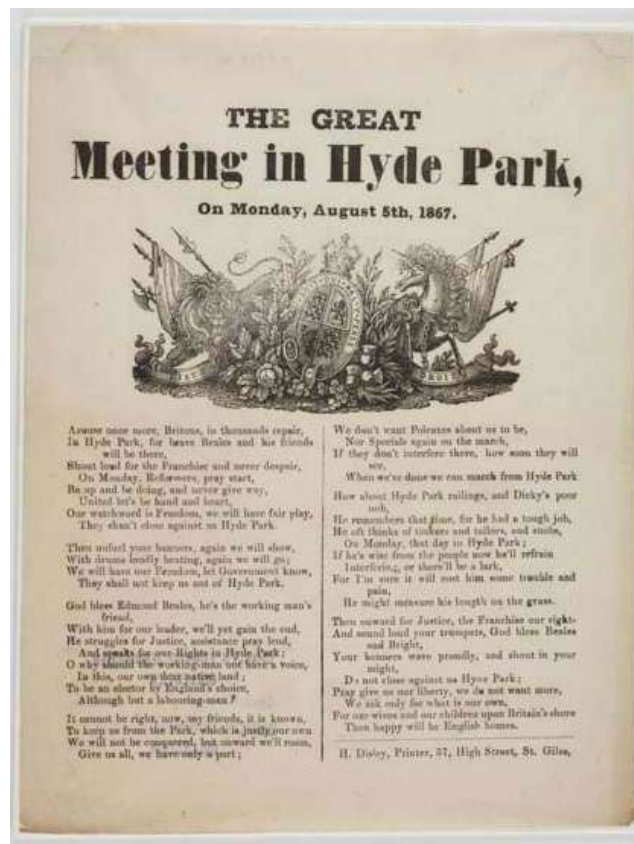
The fake signatures of 'Queen Victoria', 'Mr. Punch' and someone called 'Pugnose' have been found amongst the two million on the petition.

## How did middle class men get the vote?

In the 1860s, Hyde Park became closely associated with the right to free speech and as a place of political protest. Protests were advertised by printed handbills, or flyers. This one refers to a series of Reform Meetings held there during 1867, which demanded the vote for the 'labouring-man'.

The government tried to ban these mass political meetings, fearing they would lead to unrest and big political and social change. However, political change was already on its way.

The Great Reform Act of 1832 was one of the Reform Movement's first successes. It gave the right to vote to middle class men. Before this, only aristocrats and wealthy landowners were able to vote. A second Reform Act in 1867 extended the vote further, but still excluded working class men and all women. By 1868, just over 300,000 men, or about 10% of all Londoners, were registered to vote.



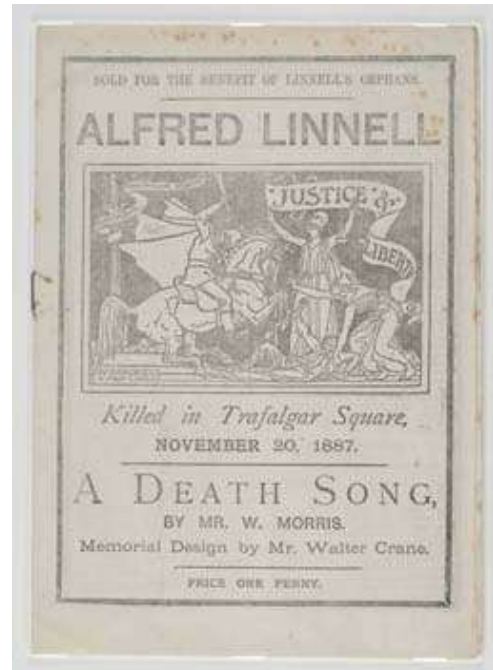
Flyer advertising 'The Great Meeting in Hyde Park', 1867

## What happened on Bloody Sunday 1887?

Between 1886 and 1887 Trafalgar Square became a rallying point for protests against economic hardship by the poor of London. Here, in the Square, the poor of London's East End came face to face with the politically powerful and wealthy West End. These protestors were supported by middle class socialists who were campaigning for greater equality for the working class.

On 13 November 1887, the police charged the assembled protestors. The events on this day became known as 'Bloody Sunday'. At a further protest on the 20 November 1887, Alfred Linnell, who was not even taking part in the protest, fell and was crushed to death by a horse.

The pamphlet was produced in response to Linnell's death. It condemns the behaviour of the police and the authorities, reflecting the outrage of middle class radicals at police brutality towards working class protestors. Its cover shows Linnell falling beneath a police horse surrounded by Justice & Liberty and was sold for one penny 'for the benefit of Linnell's orphans'.



Songsheet for *A Death Song* by William Morris, designer and founder of the Socialist League, 1887

### See also

Collections Online is an online database which allows users to find out more about the Museum of London's objects, on display and in store. Go to

[www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections](http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections)

### Visit the Museum

Galleries of interest to this topic:

Expanding City: 1666–1850s at the Museum of London

People's City: 1850–1950 at the Museum of London

### Further reading

Behagg, Clive, *Labour and Reform: Working Class Movements 1815–1914*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1991)

Rogers, Nicholas, *Crowds, Culture and Politics in Georgian Britain*, (Clarendon Press, 1998)

### Further resources for teachers/tutors

Explore the images for this topic in the Picturebank:

[www.museumoflondon.org.uk/picturebank](http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/picturebank).