Articles – Lesson 3: Chartism

(Terms in **bold italics** are explained further in the Glossary, terms underlined have their own articles)

Introduction

Although the **1832 Reform Act** seemed **radical** to some for many it had not gone far enough. Too many people were still denied direct access to the political process. Those that did become **MPs** still did not do enough for ordinary people.

The Birmingham Political Union was restarted in the late 1830s and soon became involved in **Chartism**, the working class movement that argued for votes for all men and working-class involvement in politics. It was led by the aim of the Six Points, these were: the right to vote for all men over 21, you no longer had to own property to be an **MP**, annual elections to Parliament, equal numbers of voters in each **constituency**, pay for MPs, and vote by **Secret ballot**.

Thomas Attwood (MP biography)
1783-1856, Birmingham

Thomas Attwood,
© Palace of Westminster

Thomas Attwood was born in to a middle class Warwickshire manufacturing family. He joined the family bank and for much of his early years was conservative in his politics.

Attwood had, however, a genuine sympathy for the poor. His answer to their problems was to reform the currency, ideas that were rejected at the time as very strange, but today seem less so. When no-one in government would listen to his plans, he believed that if Parliament was reformed, they might do so!

In 1830 he formed the Birmingham Political Union (BPU) and united middle class and working class reformers in a non-violent campaign to support the **1832 Reform Act**. He was a good speaker and for a time was considered one of the 'most influential men in England'.

After the *1832 'Great' Reform Act* Attwood was elected to Parliament for Birmingham. He was not very successful in Parliament, however. Without the support of allies or knowledge of how Parliament worked, few **MPs** would listen to his ideas about currency. They were soon bored of hearing about them!

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Attwood believed further reform was needed, and turned to the growing ***Chartist*** movement. Their leaders welcomed him because of his experience with the BPU. Although he had some difficulties accepting the ***Charter's Six Points***, in particular the demand for every man to be able to vote, he joined Chartist leader <u>Feargus O'Connor</u> on the platform at <u>Glasgow</u> in August 1838 when the first ***Chartist petition*** was launched.

Attwood was known as a '**moral force' Chartist** – one who opposed violence. Yet he argued:

> 'No blood shall be shed by us; but if our enemies shed blood—if they attack the people— they must take the consequences on their own heads'

Attwood presented the first **Chartist petition**, which had 1,280,958 signatures, to Parliament in June 1839. In July, he suggested that Parliament form a committee to discuss it, but this was rejected by 235 votes to 46. The rejection of the petition led to rioting across the country, also in <u>Birmingham</u> and an armed uprising in Newport, South Wales (see <u>Monmouth</u>).

Attwood retired as an ***MP*** the year after and mostly stood back from political life, disappointed with the failure of his efforts. He died, probably of Parkinson's disease, in 1856.

Did you know?
Attwood was described by future Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli as 'a provincial banker labouring under a financial monomania.'

Feargus O'Connor (MP biography)
1796-1855, Ireland and Northern England

Feargus O'Connor was born in Ireland to a wealthy Protestant family. A 'physically imposing' man, 'possessed of enormous energy and gentlemanly bearing', O'Connor first trained as a lawyer before becoming involved in Irish politics. His talents as an 'extraordinary' public speaker were revealed, but he fell out with Irish political leaders and came to England.

Once in England, he soon became involved in working-class political movements, such as Northern anti-***Poor Law*** groups. The 1834 Poor Law tried to make local government support for the unemployed or sick the same across the country, and also tried to keep costs down. The law introduced workhouses around the country and insisted that any support – such as food – could only be given inside them. Many working class people, who could lose their jobs easily if trade conditions were difficult, hated the workhouses because of their harsh conditions. However, there was no other option if you were injured, unwell or simply lost your job.

O'Connor's work with anti-***Poor Law*** groups led him to other working class political movements. He was made a member of the ***London Working Men's Association*** in November 1836, the group formed by ***William Lovett*** that wrote the ***People's Charter***. O'Connor became more involved with ***Chartism***. His newspaper, the *Northern Star*, became the unofficial journal of the movement. He helped create links with <u>Thomas Attwood</u> and the <u>Birmingham </u>Political Union, and supported the first ***Chartist petition*** launched in <u>Glasgow </u>in 1838.

Once Parliament rejected the **People's Charter**, O'Connor became associated with the '**physical force**' Chartists, who argued that the time had come to use violence to gain political rights. For example, he probably knew about, although wasn't involved in, the Newport Rising (see Monmouth). After this the movement began to split apart.

In the **repression** that followed the failed rising, O'Connor was arrested. He was accused of encouraging rebellion in the *Northern Star*. He was imprisoned for 18 months but continued to write from prison. O'Connor remained **Chartism**'s leading figure in the 1840s, and was elected to Parliament as **MP** for Nottingham in July 1847.

During 1848 the Chartists launched the third and final **Chartist petition**. Over 5 million signatures were said to have been collected, and at a mass meeting in Kennington Common, London on 10 April O'Connor addressed the crowd. However, the government was very nervous about this rally. Over 85,000 **special constables** and 8,000 troops were in place to meet between 20,000 and 50,000 **Chartists**. Fearful of the violence that could occur if the meeting marched to Parliament to present the petition, O'Connor convinced the crowd to let him deliver it instead. On doing so the petition was again rejected by Parliament.

Kennington Common, Royal Collection Trust / © HM Queen Elizabeth II 2014

After 1848 **Chartism** went into decline. In 1851 O'Connor displayed the first signs of serious mental illness, and had to be admitted to an asylum. He died in 1855 having given up most of his money to the movement. O'Connor is still remembered by historians as one of the major Chartist figures.

Did you know?
Parliament's clerks counted under two million signatures on the third **Chartist petition**, and many of these were false – Queen Victoria and the **Duke of Wellington** had apparently signed it!

Glasgow (Constituency)
Borough in Lanarkshire, Scotland. Constituency since 1832, 2 MPs

Before 1832 Glasgow was one of the towns **represented** in Parliament in the 'Clyde Burghs' constituency. After 1832 the town itself was given two **MPs**. The city had been an important port from the 18th century onwards, and in the nineteenth century it rapidly industrialised. By the 1820s its population was bigger than Edinburgh and its industries included shipbuilding, engineering and textiles.

Because of this, Glasgow was an important working class centre. In May 1838 the town's unions organised a mass rally on Glasgow Green. A number of people spoke at the meeting, including Thomas Attwood and Feargus O'Connor, but it was later remembered for the launch of the '**People's Charter**'.

The Charter had been mostly written by **William Lovett**, a former draper and founder member of the **London Working Men's Association**. He decided to present working class political demands in a Charter. His 'Six Points' were:

- The right to vote for all men over 21
- **MPs** no longer had to own property
- Annual elections to Parliament
- Equal constituency sizes
- MPs should be paid
- Vote by **secret ballot**
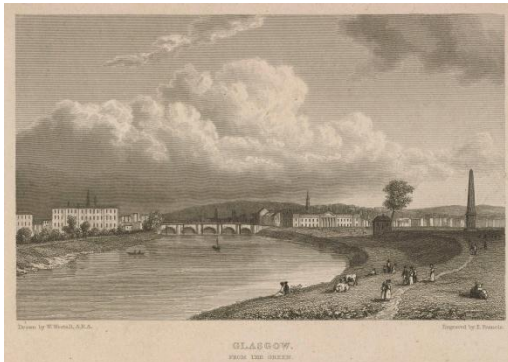
Glasgow from the Green, c19th Century
© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014

At Glasgow Green, the charter was announced to the public for the first time. 150,000 people attended the rally, and the **Six Points** soon caught on. The **Chartists**, as they became known, launched a **mass petition** across the country collecting signatures in support. Rallies took place in many of the industrial towns of Britain.

The **Six Points** united many people in the working class with different political ideas. Taken together, they were reforms that would allow the working classes to both vote and become MPs – for example by making sure that MPs were paid.

The first Charter collected over 1 million signatures before it was presented to Parliament by Thomas Attwood. After it was rejected, the **Chartist** movement began to split over what moves to take next.

Although the **Six Points** were not implemented in the 1840s, only one – annual elections – was not in place by 1918.

Did you know?
There were in total three Chartist petitions to Parliament, in 1839, 1842 and 1848.

Monmouth (Constituency)
Borough in Monmouthshire, South Wales from 1660, 1 MP

The **constituency** of Monmouth represented the towns of Newport, Monmouth and Usk.

Although the **MPs** for Monmouth were Whigs or Conservatives, many people in South East Wales were politically **radical** in the first half of the 19th century. The mines and ironworks of the valleys led to increased population growth and hard working conditions. Men could lose their jobs if coal or steel prices fell and there was no **welfare state** to support them. Relations between the mine and steelworks owners and the workers were often bad, and there were a number of strikes.

In the 1830s South Wales saw a rise in support for **Chartism**. The movement's leader in the area was Henry Vincent, who published the newspaper *The Western Vindicator*. Facing economic difficulties and with no political voice, many working-class men and women supported the movement in meetings and petitions.

After the first **Chartist petition** was rejected in 1839, many in the movement were split about what to do next. Some argued for a national strike, whereas others wanted a violent uprising to demand working class political rights.

In November, 5000 men marched on Newport under the leadership of John Frost, Zephaniah Williams and William Jones. It is unclear exactly what they had planned. Some historians believe that they hoped to start an uprising, especially as a number of **Chartists** were carrying weapons. Others have argued that most men were marching to protest about the arrest of Henry Vincent, who was being held in the city's Westgate Hotel, and the weapons were just to protect themselves.

The marchers arrived outside the Westgate Hotel, unaware that a small force of troops was waiting. At 9.20am a gun battle broke out between the **Chartists** and the soldiers, killing 22 and wounding over fifty marchers, and seriously wounding two soldiers. The leaders were arrested and initially sentenced to be **hung, drawn and quartered** – the punishment for treason – but this was reduced to **transportation** to Australia.

Despite the failure of the rising, there was still a large amount of sympathy for **Chartism** in South Wales throughout the 1840s when the movement gradually petered out.

Did you know?
The **MP** for Monmouth, Reginald Jones Blewitt, was a well-known critic of **Chartism** and his local paper, the *Monmouthshire Merlin*, often said so!

Additional Materials

Political Reform Topic Introduction

The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a period of great change in Britain. This was especially the case for Parliament. At the start of the nineteenth century only a few, very rich people had any say in politics. By the end, many more people – although not everyone – could choose their *Member of Parliament*.

The changes were driven by the *Industrial Revolution* and events abroad, such as the *American* and *French Revolutions*.

In what historians call the '*Industrial Revolution*', new technologies were introduced into manufacturing. This meant that goods could be made in larger numbers and much more cheaply. It led to many major social changes. Many people moved from the countryside to new towns to work in the new factories. New 'classes' of people emerged – the wealthier middle classes, such as those who owned or managed the new factories, and the working classes who mostly worked in them. Generally, the people in these groups could not vote, and many felt that their interests were not *represented* in Parliament.

A new Steam Engine, 1857

For many in the working classes, lives were very hard. Some trades that had been well-paid were replaced by machines. The people who had worked in these trades either lost their jobs or had to accept much lower wages. In the countryside, machines replaced many jobs, leading to unemployment and low wages. If trade was bad, many employers cut their workers' jobs or wages. For those in the new towns, conditions were often dirty and overcrowded. Many died from diseases such as cholera, and working conditions could be dangerous.

There was little support for ordinary people if they lost their jobs or were injured: no *welfare state* to support them. When working people faced economic problems, pressure for political reform grew. They felt that if they had a say in politics, they would be able to improve their lives.

At around the same time, the *American* and *French Revolutions* introduced new *radical* political ideas. Some people started to think that more people had *the right* to have a say in how they were governed. Why should the landowners speak for everyone?

Glossary: Poor Law

Also known as the 'New Poor Law'. In the nineteenth century, people who could not work because they were sick or because they could not find any work were cared for by local government. In 1834 *Earl Grey*'s government (see <u>1830-32 Parliament(s)</u>) passed measures to try to make this system the same everywhere in the country and less expensive. The law said that the poor could only receive help in workhouses – which were hated by many because of the harsh conditions in them. This law was very unpopular amongst the working classes who had nowhere else to turn if they lost their jobs or could not work because of sickness or injury.