

Samuel Bamford's Account of the Peterloo Massacre

By eight o'clock on the morning of Monday, the 16th of August, 1819, the whole town of Middleton might be said to be on the alert: some to go to the meeting, and others to see the procession, the like of which, for such a purpose, had never before taken place in that neighbourhood.

First were selected twelve of the most comely and decent-looking youths, who were placed in two rows of six each, with each a branch of laurel held presented in his hand, as a token of amity and peace; then followed the men of several districts in fives; then the band of music, an excellent one; then the colours: a blue one of silk, with inscriptions in golden letters, "Unity and Strength," "Liberty and Fraternity"; a green one of silk, with golden letters, "Parliaments Annual," "Suffrage Universal"; and betwixt them, on a staff, a handsome cap of crimson velvet with a tuft of laurel, and the cap tastefully braided, with the word "Libertas" in front. Next were placed the remainder of the men of the districts in fives.

Every hundred men had a leader, who was distinguished by a sprig of laurel in his hat; others similarly distinguished were appointed over these, and the whole were to obey the directions of a principal conductor, who took his place at the head of the column, with a bugle-man to sound his orders ...

At the sound of the bugle not less than three thousand men formed a hollow square, with probably as many people around them, and, an impressive silence having been obtained, I reminded them that they were going to attend the most important meeting that had ever been held for Parliamentary Reform, and I hoped their conduct would be marked by a steadiness and seriousness befitting the occasion, and such as would cast shame upon their enemies, who had always represented the reformers as a mob-like rabble; but they would see they were not so that day. I requested they would not leave their ranks, nor show carelessness, nor inattention to the order of their leaders; but that they would walk comfortably and agreeably together. Not to offer any insult or provocation by word or deed; nor to notice any persons who might do the same by them, but to keep such persons as quiet as possible; for if they began to retaliate, the least disturbance might serve as a pretext for dispersing the meeting. If the peace officers should come to arrest myself or any other person, they were not to offer any resistance, but suffer them to execute their office peaceably. When at the meeting, they were to keep themselves as select as possible, with their banners in the centre, so that if individuals straggled, or got away from the main body, they would know where to find them again by seeing their banners; and when the meeting was dissolved, they were to get close around their banners and leave the town as soon as possible, lest, should they stay drinking, or loitering about the streets, their enemies should take advantage, and send some of them to the New Bailey.

I also said that, in conformity with a rule of the committee, no sticks, nor weapons of any description, would be allowed to be carried in the ranks; and those who had such were requested to put them aside, or leave them with some friend until their return. In consequence of this order many sticks were left behind; and a few only of the oldest and most infirm amongst us were allowed to carry their walking staves. I may say with truth that we presented a most respectable assemblage of labouring men; all were decently, though humbly attired; and I noticed not even one who did not exhibit a white Sunday's shirt, a neckcloth, and other apparel in the same clean, though homely condition.

My address was received with cheers; it was heartily and unanimously assented to. We opened into column, the music struck up, the banners flashed in the sunlight, other music was heard; it was that of the Rochdale party coming to join us. We met, and a shout from ten thousand startled the echoes of the woods and dingles. Then all was quiet save the breath of music; and with intent seriousness we went on.

Our whole column, with the Rochdale people, would probably consist of six thousand men. At our head were a hundred or two of women, mostly young wives, and mine own was amongst them. ...whilst on each side of our line walked some thousands of stragglers. And thus, accompanied by our friends and our dearest and most tender connections, we went slowly towards Manchester...

At **Blackley** the accession to our ranks and the crowd in the road had become much greater. At **Harpurhey** we halted, whilst the band and those who thought proper, refreshed with a cup of prime ale from Sam Ogden's tap. When the bugle sounded every man took his place, and we advanced.

At Newtown [a little south of Harpurhey] we were welcomed with open arms by the poor Irish weavers, who came out in their best drapery, and uttered blessings and words of endearment, many of which were not understood by our rural patriots. Some of them danced, and others stood with clasped hands and tearful eyes, adoring almost, that banner whose colour was their national one, and the emblem of their green island home. We thanked them by the band striking up, "Saint Patrick's Day in the morning." They were electrified; and we passed on, leaving those warm-hearted suburbans capering and whooping like mad.

Having squeezed ourselves through the gully of a road below St. Michael's Church, we traversed Blackley Street and Miller's Lane, and went along **Swan Street** and **Oldham Street**, frequently hailed in our progress by the cheers of the towns-people. We learned that other parties were on the field before us, and that the Lees and Saddleworth Union had been led by Doctor Healey, walking before a pitch-black flag, with staring white letters, forming the words, "Equal Representation or Death," "Love"—two hands joined and a heart; all in white paint, and presenting one of the most sepulchral looking objects that could be contrived. ...

Having crossed **Piccadilly**, we went down **Mosley Street**, then almost entirely inhabited by wealthy families. We took the left side of **St. Peter's Church**, and at this angle we wheeled quickly and, steadily into **Peter Street**, and soon approached a wide unbuilt space, occupied by an immense multitude, which opened and received us with loud cheers. We walked into that chasm of human beings and took our station from the hustings across the causeway of Peter Street, and so remained, undistinguishable from without, but still forming an almost unbroken line, with our colours in the centre.

My wife I had not seen for some time; but when last I caught a glimpse of her, she was with some decent, married females; and thinking the party quite safe in their own discretion, I felt not much uneasiness on their account, and so had greater liberty in attending to the business of the meeting.

In about half an hour after our arrival the sounds of music and reiterated shouts proclaimed the near approach of Mr. Hunt and his party; and in a minute or two they were seen coming from Deansgate, preceded by a band of music and several flags. On the driving seat of a barouche sat a neatly dressed female, supporting a small flag, on which were some emblematical drawings and an inscription. Within the carriage were Mr. Hunt, who stood up, Mr. Johnson, of Smedley Cottage; Mr. Moorhouse, of Stockport; Mr. Carlile, of London; Mr. John Knight, of Manchester; and Mr. Saxton, a sub-editor of the Manchester Observer. Their approach was hailed by one universal shout from probably eighty thousand persons. They threaded their way slowly past us and through the crowd, which Hunt eyed, I thought, with almost as much of astonishment as satisfaction. This spectacle could not be otherwise in his view than solemnly impressive. Such a mass of human beings he had not beheld till then. His responsibility must weigh on his mind. Their power for good or evil was irresistible, and who should direct that power? Himself alone who had called it forth. The task was great, and not without its peril. The meeting was indeed a tremendous one. He mounted the hustings; the music ceased; Mr. Johnson proposed that Mr. Hunt should take the chair;

it was seconded, and carried by acclamation; and Mr. Hunt, stepping towards the front of the stage, took off his white hat, and addressed the people.

Whilst he was doing so, I proposed to an acquaintance that, as the speeches and resolutions were not likely to contain anything new to us, and as we could see them in the papers, we should retire awhile and get some refreshment, of which I stood much in need, being not in very robust health. He assented, and we had got to nearly the outside of the crowd, when a noise and strange murmur arose towards the church. Some persons said it was the Blackburn people coming; and I stood on tiptoe and looked in the direction whence the noise proceeded, and saw a party of cavalry in blue and white uniform come trotting, sword in hand, round the corner of a garden-wall, and to the front of a row of new houses, where they reined up in a line.

“The soldiers are here,” I said; “we must go back and see what this means.” “Oh,” someone made reply, “they are only come to be ready if there should be any disturbance in the meeting.” “Well, let us go back,” I said, and we forced our way towards the colours.

On the cavalry drawing up they were received with a shout of good-will, as I understood it. They shouted again, waving their sabres over their heads; and then, slackening rein, and striking spur into their steeds, they dashed forward and began cutting the people.

“Stand fast,” I said, “they are riding upon us; stand fast.” And there was a general cry in our quarter of “Stand fast.” The cavalry were in confusion: they evidently could not, with all the weight of man and horse, penetrate that compact mass of human beings; and their sabres were plied to hew a way through naked held-up hands and defenceless heads; and then chopped limbs and wound-gaping skulls were seen; and groans and cries were mingled with the din of that horrid confusion. “Ah! ah!” “for shame! for shame!” was shouted. Then, “Break! break! they are killing them in front, and they cannot get away;” and there was a general cry of “break! break.” For a moment the crowd held back as in a pause; then was a rush, heavy and resistless as a headlong sea, and a sound like low thunder, with screams, prayers, and imprecations from the crowd-moiled and sabre-doomed who could not escape.

By this time Hunt and his companions had disappeared from the hustings, and some of the yeomanry, perhaps less sanguinarily disposed than others, were busied in cutting down the flag-staves and demolishing the flags at the hustings.

On the breaking of the crowd the yeomanry wheeled, and, dashing whenever there was an opening, they followed, pressing and wounding. Many females appeared as the crowd opened; and striplings or mere youths also were found. Their cries were piteous and heart-rending; and would, one might have supposed, have disarmed any human resentment: but here their appeals were in vain. Women, white-vested maids, and tender youths, were indiscriminately sabred or trampled; and we have reason for believing that few were the instances in which that forbearance was vouchsafed which they so earnestly implored.

In ten minutes from the commencement of the havoc the field was an open and almost deserted space. The sun looked down through a sultry and motionless air. The curtains and blinds of the windows within view were all closed. A gentleman or two might occasionally be seen looking out from one of the new houses before mentioned, near the door of which a group of persons (special constables) were collected, and apparently in conversation; others were assisting the wounded or carrying off the dead. The hustings remained, with a few broken and hewed flag-staves erect, and a torn and gashed banner or two dropping; whilst over the whole field were strewed caps, bonnets, hats, shawls, and shoes, and other parts of male and female dress, trampled, torn, and bloody. The yeomanry had dismounted—some were easing their horses' girths, others adjusting their

accoutrements, and some were wiping their sabres.... Persons might sometimes be noticed peeping from attics and over the tall ridgings of houses, but they quickly withdrew, as if fearful of being observed, or unable to sustain the full gaze of a scene so hideous and abhorrent.

Besides the Manchester yeomanry, who, as I have already shown, did “the duty of the day,” there came upon the ground soon after the attack the 15th Hussars and the Cheshire yeomanry; and the latter, as if emulous of the Manchester corps, intercepted the flying masses, and inflicted some severe sabre wounds. The hussars, we have reason for supposing, gave but few wounds, and I am not aware that it has been shown, that one of those brave soldiers dishonoured his sword by using the edge of it. In addition to the cavalry, a strong body of the 88th Foot was stationed at the lower corner of Dickinson Street: with their bayonets at the charge, they wounded several persons, and greatly impeded the escape of the fugitives by that outlet. Almost simultaneously with the hussars, four pieces of Horse artillery appeared from **Deansgate**, and about two hundred special constables were also in attendance; so that force for a thorough massacre was ready, had it been wanted.

On the first rush of the crowd I called to our men to break their flag-staves and secure their banners, but probably I was not heard or understood, all being then inextricable confusion. He with the blue banner saved it, the cap of liberty was dropped and left behind—indeed, woe to him who stopped, he would never have risen again; and Thomas Redford, who carried the green banner, held it aloft until the staff was cut in his hand, and his shoulder was divided by the sabre of one of the Manchester yeomanry.

A number of our people were driven to some timber which lay at the foot of the wall of the Quakers' meeting house [**Mount Street**]. Being pressed by the yeomanry, a number sprung over the balks and defended themselves with stones which they found there. It was not without difficulty, and after several were wounded, that they were driven out. A heroine, a young married woman of our party, with her face all bloody, her hair streaming about her, her bonnet hanging by the string, and her apron weighed with stones, kept her assailant at bay until she fell backwards and was near being taken; but she got away covered with severe bruises. It was near this place and about this time that one of the yeomanry was dangerously wounded and unhorsed by a blow from a fragment of a brick; and it was supposed to have been flung by this woman.

On the first advance of the yeomanry, one of the horses, plunging at the crowd, sent its fore feet into the head of our big drum, which was left near the hustings, and was irrecoverable. Thus, booted on both legs at once, the horse, rolled over, and the drum was kicked to pieces in the melee. For my own part, I had the good fortune to escape without injury, though it was more, than I expected. I was carried, I may say almost literally, to the lower end of the Quakers' meeting house, the further wall of which screened us from observation and pursuit, and afforded access to some open streets. ... Two of the yeomanry were next in our way, and I expected a broken head, having laurel in my hat, but one was striking on one side, and the other on the other, and at that moment I stepped betwixt them and escaped.

After quitting the field, I first found myself in King Street, and passing into Market Street and High Street, I more leisurely pursued my way, taking care, lest some official should notice me, to remove the laurel from the outside to the inside of my hat. I was now unhappy on account of my wife, and I blamed myself greatly for consenting to her coming at all; I learned, however, when in St. George's Road, that she was well, and was on the way towards home; and that satisfied me for the time.

Having met with an old neighbour, we agreed to go round past **Smedley** Cottage, to learn what intelligence had arrived there. We descended the hill at **Collyhurst**, and on arriving at the bottom we espied a party of cavalry, whom from their dress I took to be of the Manchester yeomanry, riding

along the road we had quitted towards Harpurhey. One of them wore a broad green band, or sash, across his shoulder and breast; I thought from its appearance it was a fragment of our green banner, and I was not mistaken. They were traversing the suburbs to reconnoitre and to pick up any person they could identify (myself, for instance, had I then been in their way), and the inglorious exhibition of the torn banner was permitted for the gratification of the vanity of the captor. This party rode forward a short distance, and then returned, without making any prisoners from our party.

At Smedley Cottage we found Mrs. Johnson, her two children (I think two), her maidservant, and Mr. Hunt's groom, who had just come from the town, and had brought the information that Mr. Hunt, Mr. Johnson, Knight, Moorhouse, and several others, were prisoners in the New Bailey. I was touched by the lady's situation, though she bore the trial better than I could have expected. We gave her some particulars of the meeting, to which she listened with a manner mournfully thoughtful, occasionally shedding tears, and her features pale and calm as marble. She spoke not much: she was evidently too full to hold discourse, and so, with good wishes and consoling hopes, we took our departure.

We now called at Harpurhey, and found at the public house, and in the road there, a great number of the Middleton and Rochdale people, who had come from the meeting. My first inquiry was for my wife, on whose account I now began to be downright miserable. I asked many about her, but could not hear any tidings, and I turned back toward Manchester, with a resolution to have vengeance if any harm had befallen her. But I had not gone far ere I espied her at a distance, hastening towards me; we met, and our first emotions were those of thankfulness to God for our preservation. She had been in greater peril and distress of mind, if possible, than myself: the former she escaped in a remarkable manner, and through the intervention of special constables, to whom let us award their due. She afterwards heard, first, that I was killed; next, that I was wounded and in the Infirmary; then, that I was a prisoner; and lastly, that she would find me on the road home. Her anxiety being now removed by the assurance of my safety, she hastened forward to console our child. I rejoined my comrades, and forming about a thousand of them into file, we set off to the sound of fife and drum, with our only banner waving, and in that form, we re-entered the town of Middleton.

The banner was exhibited from a window of the Suffield Arms public house. The cap of liberty was restored to us by a young man from Chadderton, who had picked it up on the outskirts of the field; and now we spent the evening in recapitulating the events of the day, and in brooding over a spirit of vengeance towards the authors of our humiliation and our wrong. ...

I went to John Kay, in Royley Lane, but he was, as usual, imperturbably placid. He was one of the least impassioned men I ever knew.

After introducing the cause of my visit, I asked his opinion, and in order to obtain it frankly I spoke the more so. "If the people were ever to rise and smite their enemies, was not that the time? Was every enormity to be endured, and this after all? Were we still to lie down like whipped hounds, whom nothing could arouse to resistance? Were there not times and seasons, and circumstances, under which the common rules of wisdom became folly, prudence became cowardice, and submission became criminal? and was not the present one of those times and seasons?" It was astonishing that men could eat and sleep, that "the voice of their brothers' blood crying from the ground did not make them miserable."

"It does make them miserable," said this philosopher, for he was one if ever such existed in humble life, and we are taught to believe as much—"it does make them miserable, and on account of this affair neither you nor I are happy, but our oppressors are wretched. We, according to the impulse of our nature, wish to avenge that outrage. Let us be quiet, it is already in the course of

avengement. Those men would, even now, shrink out of existence if they were only assured of getting to heaven quietly. They are already invoking that obliviousness which will never come to their relief.”

“Again, if the people took vengeance into their own hands, where would they begin? where would they end? Would they denounce all Manchester and the whole country?”

“No, no, the authors and perpetrators only.”

“But how could they be got at? Would we descend to assassination?”

“No, no!”

“To indiscriminate massacre, like that we had witnessed?”

“Oh, no, no!”

“Could we march against an army?”

“We had no thought of doing so, we had no thought of anything save avenging in some way our slain and imprisoned fellow-beings.”

“Then,” he said, “we had best remain as we were; we should hear of a sensation in many parts which would forward our cause, but the least outrage on ours would only strengthen the aggressors, and create that plea of justification which alone could mitigate their remorse. They would exclaim, 'See, these are the men who came with peace on their lips; behold now the violence of their hearts—what would they not have done had we not put them down—and so, claiming merit for what they had done, they would next arraign their captives, our friends, and have them executed.'” Such was the substance of the arguments of our friend John Kay. His reasons had at all times some weight with me; on this occasion they were conclusive.