

Samuel Bamford at Peterloo

16th of August, 1819

It was eight o'clock in the morning. Everyone in the town of Middleton was ready. Some were going to a meeting in Manchester. They formed up into a procession. Others were just going to watch. There had never been such a grand procession in Middleton before.

Twelve young men marched in front. They held laurel branches. Behind them marched half of the Middleton men. Then came the band playing. Then came the banners. The banners explained why the meeting was being held. The people wanted to be able to vote for their MP even if they were poor. The rest of the men marched behind. The men could march, turn or stop together. They had a bugler to help them.

Samuel Bamford was one of the organisers of the meeting. He told the men to be well behaved. He told them to be serious and peaceful. They must not carry weapons he said. Many people did not want poor people to vote. They did not want them to hold a meeting to ask to vote. If they were not well behaved these people would see. Then they would get the Middleton men sent off to prison. As he spoke, Samuel Bamford looked round. He could see the men were poor. But he could see they had on their Sunday clothes. They were clean and neat. The men cheered. The band began to play. Off they all marched.

Along came the men from Rochdale. On they all went to Manchester together. The men's wives marched in front. Samuel Bamford's wife was there too. Many other people crowded round to watch them march. They came to a place where some poor Irish weavers lived. The Irish were delighted to see them. They cheered and danced. The marchers got near Manchester. They found that other processions were joining them.

They kept good order. The bugler helped them turn together. Soon they reached the meeting place. It was an empty piece of ground. There was a big crowd in the open space. They cheered to see the Middleton men. The Middleton men stood still. They were in a neat group like soldiers on parade. Mr Bamford looked round. Where was his wife? Ah, he could see her. She was with the other wives standing quietly in a line.

The huge crowd waited. They made no noise. Then they could hear people cheering. Mr Orator Hunt was coming to give his speech. Orator Hunt was in an open carriage. Other leaders were with him. They were men who wanted the poor people to be able to vote. They wanted the price of bread to be made cheaper for poor people. The crowd gave a very big cheer.

Orator Hunt was surprised. "I have never seen so many people!" he thought. "Now the government will listen. They will change their mind. They will let the poor people vote. They will stop the tax that makes bread dear." Mr Hunt went very slowly to the front. "The government will be looking to see how the people behave," he thought. "If they behave well the government will trust them. They will understand that the people are wise. Wise enough to vote. I must be careful what I say. I must make sure the people are well behaved."

Orator Hunt got up onto the stage. He took off his smart white hat. He began to speak to the people. They were very quiet. Then Samuel Bamford noticed something. Was it more people arriving at the meeting? No! It was soldiers on horses. They had blue and white uniforms. They held their swords in their hands. The soldiers stopped in a line in front of some new houses.

When the crowd saw the soldiers they gave a cheer. The soldiers shouted back. But then a terrible thing happened. The soldiers waved their swords over their heads. They galloped into the thick crowd waving their swords. They had been sent to arrest Orator Hunt.

Many people were hurt at the meeting by the soldiers. Some were even killed. The people tried to run away. The crowd was too thick for them to get away easily. The soldiers arrested Orator Hunt. They cut down all the banners and flags. In ten minutes there was no one left in the open space. All over the ground were hats, bonnets, shoes and broken banners. The people had dropped these things as they tried to get away. The soldiers galloped after them. The soldiers tried to catch as many as they could. Then they would be sent to prison.

Samuel Bamford got away. He was not hurt. Many of his friends did not get away. He set off for home. He was very worried. Where was his wife? Was she hurt? He could not find his wife. He asked everyone he met. At last he turned back to Manchester. He

had not gone far when he saw her. How thankful to God they were that both of them were safe! Samuel Bamford's wife had been worried about him too. She hurried home. Samuel Bamford found some of the Middleton men. They got into marching order. They still had one banner. They marched back into Middleton.

Samuel Bamford had a friend called John Kay. He went to see John Kay. He wanted to ask him what he thought. What had happened had made all the poor people very sad. Did he think they should fight back?

“Yes, you are sad,” said John Kay. “but the men who sent the soldiers are more sad. If you fight back you will be like them. They know they have done wrong. Everyone knows it. Many more people are now on your side. They think you are right now. They will change their minds if you fight back. It will be harder to get parliament to change then. If you all stay peaceful, people will notice. They will say that you deserve to be able to vote. They will say that it is a shame the price of bread is so high.”

Nowadays everyone can vote for their MP. What happened at Peterloo was very sad. But some good came of it. It helped people understand that everyone should be able to vote.