

As a subject of study, Chartism has grown in popularity in recent years. This would have surprised the Victorians, to most of whom it was a transitory phenomenon, causing a stir in the early 1840s, making a brief, rather anti-climactic, resurgence in 1848 and then passing into history. Certainly, if one measures a movement's success by whether or not it attained its goal, Chartism has to be accounted a failure, especially when compared with the Anti-Corn Law League. Yet, even though the League's victory had far-reaching consequences for Victorian Britain, Chartism was a sign of something even more profound. It was the first truly national working-class political movement, and it anticipated all the major political movements of the century ahead.

Chartism fought for a complete overhaul of the parliamentary system. This topic covers its main aims (as encapsulated in the People's Charter), significant events in its short life, the personalities of its leaders and the extent to which their differing approaches had consequences for the movement as a whole. The document-based activities are designed to help students assess the true nature of the movement — its strengths and its weaknesses — and to judge its importance as a political force.

In this topic you will find the following:

- ◆ **RS3.1** Timeline
- ◆ **RS3.2** A brief outline: the movement's aims and origins
- ◆ **RS3.3** Common student errors
- ◆ **WS3.4** Profile exercise: leading figures of the Chartist movement
- ◆ **WS3.5** Primary document exercise: the People's Charter
- ◆ **WS3.6** Primary document exercise: two contrasting accounts of O'Connor
- ◆ **WS3.7** Primary document exercise: Chartism loses a champion
- ◆ **WS3.8** Primary document exercise: the 1842 petition
- ◆ **WS3.9** Primary document and cartoon exercise: Chartism and violence



## 3.1 Timeline

- 1811** Hampden Clubs are set up to campaign for parliamentary reform.
- 1812** William Cobbett founds his radical newspaper *The Political Register*.
- 1816** Cobbett launches his *Political Register* as a pamphlet, thereby avoiding newspaper stamp duty and enabling it to be sold more cheaply.
- 1819** Peterloo massacre.
- 1829** Thomas Attwood founds the Birmingham Political Union.
- 1831–32** Reform Bill crisis and Great Reform Act is passed in 1832.
- 1834** Robert Owen forms Grand National Consolidated Trades Union; Tolpuddle case; Poor Law Amendment Act is followed by major protest campaign.
- 1836** Newspaper stamp duty is reduced; William Lovett helps found the London Working Men's Association (LWMA).
- 1837** Birmingham Political Union petitions Parliament about industrial distress and universal suffrage; Feargus O'Connor launches the *Northern Star*.
- 1838** LWMA publishes the People's Charter; election of members to the Chartist National Convention; Anti-Corn Law League is founded; leading Chartist J. R. Stephens is arrested in Lancashire.
- 1839** National Convention opens in Birmingham; riots at the Birmingham Bull Ring; Lovett is arrested; Attwood presents the Chartist petition to Parliament, which rejects it; 'Sacred Month' strike in August (many Chartists are arrested); Chartist attack on Westgate Hotel, Newport, in November — the 'Newport Rising'.
- 1840** Chartist leader John Frost is sentenced to death (later commuted to 14 years' transportation); abortive Chartist risings in Sheffield, Bethnal Green, Dewsbury and Bradford; Lovett and other Chartists are released.
- 1841** Whig government falls; Peel becomes prime minister; Joseph Sturge founds the Complete Suffrage Union.
- 1842** Chartist Convention in London; Lovett attends Complete Suffrage Union meeting; second Chartist petition presented to Parliament (rejected); the 'Plug Plot'.
- 1843** O'Connor is tried and acquitted; Chartist Land Scheme is launched.
- 1844** Relations break down between Chartists and Anti-Corn Law League; Rochdale Pioneers set up Co-Operative store.
- 1845** Radical Chartist George Harney takes over the *Northern Star*.
- 1846** Repeal of the Corn Laws; Peel's government falls.
- 1847** O'Connorville, first of the Chartist villages, is opened.
- 1848** Revolution in France and Communist Manifesto published; Kennington Common demonstration and presentation of third Chartist petition to Parliament in April (rejected).
- 1849** Major Chartist conference in London.
- 1850** The *Red Republican* newspaper is launched by George Harney; O'Connor loses control of Chartism to Harney's radicals.
- 1851** Chartist Land Scheme is wound up; Chartism turns from political to social reform.
- 1852** *Northern Star* changes name to *Star of Freedom* but soon folds; O'Connor is pronounced insane and committed to an asylum.
- 1855** Last Chartist Convention.



## 3.2 A brief outline

### The movement's aims and origins

#### What was Chartism?

Chartism was a political movement that campaigned for a thoroughgoing reform of Parliament and the electoral system. It took its name from the People's Charter, drawn up by William Lovett in 1838. It worked entirely within the existing political structure of the day, seeking to get various of its members elected to Parliament (for example, Feargus O'Connor) or, failing that, working through existing MPs (for example, Thomas Attwood). It printed pamphlets and tracts, and held public meetings at which petitions were signed and sent off to Parliament. As the main focus of its activity, Chartism made use of the traditional right to petition Parliament, which it did in 1839, 1842 and 1848, although only on the last occasion did Parliament examine the petition in detail. Chartists also strove to improve the fortunes of working people through a programme of education, a drive against alcoholic drink and a campaign to enlist Church of England clergymen to preach on biblical support for social equality. Feargus O'Connor worked on a scheme to set up 'Chartist villages', which were to be communities run along the principles of equality and communal responsibilities — not unlike the kibbutz model later established in Israel. Chartism continued after the failure of the 1848 petition and was influential in establishing the trade union movement, which began to grow in size and importance from the 1860s onwards.

#### Where did Chartism come from?

Chartism did not spring fully formed from William Lovett's mind. Eighteenth-century Britain had seen a mushrooming of political clubs and societies, which usually debated and passed resolutions on the need for a reform of Parliament. Their operation had been severely curtailed by Pitt's repressive wartime legislation, but they had revived after 1815, and local political clubs and petitioning groups were an important feature of the build-up to the passage of the Great Reform Act of 1832. Despite the government's attempts to price radical newspapers beyond their readers' reach with a heavy stamp duty, those such as the *Black Dwarf*, the *Poor Man's Guardian* and William Cobbett's *Political Register* kept their working-class readers informed of the latest political developments and ideas. Furthermore, in 1829 a large and well-organised campaigning group was set up in Birmingham by the financier Thomas Attwood: the Birmingham Political Union. Attwood would become an important supporter of Chartism in its early days.

Before 1832 these clubs and associations tended to bring together both middle- and working-class people in a common cause, but after the passage of the Reform Act the two groups split apart, the middle classes turning their attentions away from parliamentary reform toward the repeal of the Corn Laws. However, the working classes, who had campaigned vigorously for the vote in the years before 1832 and had sometimes been imprisoned for their pains, grew increasingly disillusioned with the Reform Act. Far from ushering in a new period of prosperity, as many had believed it would, the Act actually seemed to have made things worse. In 1834 the same Whigs who had passed Reform only two years earlier clamped down on the Tolpuddle labourers and introduced the widely detested Poor Law Amendment Act, imposing the workhouse system on the whole country. The erection of these 'bastilles' prompted a major campaign of resistance: there were physical assaults on workhouses, and working-class





### 3.2 A brief outline

political groups launched a vigorous programme of speeches, pamphlets, articles and cartoons aimed at getting the Poor Law repealed. This was also the time when Robert Owen was promoting his admittedly over-ambitious Grand National Consolidated Trades Union. Meanwhile, in Ireland, the campaign to repeal the Act of Union was under way, with well-orchestrated ‘monster meetings’, pamphlets and articles, all supported by a mass movement under a politically canny leadership. It is no coincidence that a leading figure in Chartism, Feargus O’Connor, was Irish and had been active in the Repeal movement.

By the late 1830s, therefore, educated working men had considerable experience of putting together political movements and associations and of campaigning for a specific political end. Thus, when William Lovett helped form the London Working Men’s Association in 1836, he was not doing anything particularly new, simply promoting the development of a movement that was already well under way. What was new was his decision to crystallise all of the various economic and social issues on which working-class groups were campaigning into a fully thought-through reform of the whole parliamentary system.



## 3.3 Common student errors

### Not understanding the importance of the Six Points

\*\*\*\*\* The People's Charter consisted of Six Points, which lend themselves to learning by rote:

- universal suffrage
- vote by ballot
- equal electoral districts
- no property qualification for MPs
- payment of MPs
- annual parliaments

As well as learning the points by heart, students need to have a clear idea of why the Chartists focused on them and what each of them meant. With the exception of annual parliaments (i.e. a newly elected parliament every year), all eventually came into being.

The first thing to appreciate is that the Six Points constituted a package. The Chartists did not consider them as things that could be picked off one by one, with Parliament granting one or two but not the rest. In this, Lovett and his colleagues actually showed the sophistication of their thinking. For example, abolishing the property qualification for MPs would have achieved nothing if it were not accompanied by payment for MPs as well. Universal suffrage sounded fine as a slogan, but it was useless unless working people could actually stand for Parliament and sit in it.

The People's Charter was itself a highly sophisticated document. It was not a list of demands or points, but a draft act of Parliament, correctly drawn up with all its clauses and subclauses, merely awaiting Parliament's approval. It signifies how politically aware and educated working-class movements were becoming by the 1830s.

#### Universal suffrage

This was a common radical slogan, frequently seen on banners in pictures of political marches and demonstrations of the time. In theory, the words implied that the vote should be given to every adult, including women, and there were plenty of Chartists who argued for female suffrage when the Charter was being drawn up. In the event, it was decided that it would be too difficult to win support for this, so the Chartist definition of 'universal suffrage' became universal *male* suffrage. The movement, however, remained remarkable for the level of support it enjoyed among working-class women.

#### Vote by ballot

The idea of standing in front of a large crowd and declaring your vote seems so odd to us now that it is hard to see how anyone could have defended it, but in fact even many Chartists thought it preferable to the ballot. Although the ballot was the first of the Chartist demands to pass into law, thanks to Gladstone's 1872 Ballot Act, the Chartists were opposed to the idea of a ballot vote unless it was accompanied by universal suffrage and other guarantees of working-class involvement in politics. When the franchise was limited to a small number of people, there was a strong sense that these people were casting their votes on behalf of the community, and that, by declaring their votes in public, they were fulfilling their civic duty. It is true that landlords could take action against tenants who voted against their wishes, but equally so could everyone else — voters were answerable to their neighbours as well as to their landlords. Introducing vote by ballot would free voters from intimidation by their landlords, but it would also free them from supervision by the community; therefore, unless it was accompanied by working-class representation in Parliament, the ballot could become a way for landlords to intimidate voters without the rest of the community realising what was going on.



### 3.3 Common student errors

#### Equal electoral districts

This was a more radical demand. In purely democratic terms it makes sense for MPs to represent regions of roughly equal size and population, but thinking democratically was not how mainstream politics worked in the 1830s. Parliament reflected the way society itself was structured, and the central structure of the social hierarchy was the shire county. County bishops presided over county dioceses from cathedrals in county towns; local landowners raised troops and money for the county regiment or for county troops of militia, and already cricket was being organised along county lines. Once a year all the squires and farmers of the county would meet up for the County Meeting to discuss county concerns. It took place in the county town and was presided over by the most prominent of the county gentry. Within Parliament, MPs for county seats were accorded special prominence, and it had always seemed natural that the great landowners of the county should choose who should represent the county in Parliament. Proposing to break the counties up into smaller divisions therefore hit at the heart of the traditional social and political hierarchy of the whole country, breaking the historic bond between squire and people and replacing it with crude demographic mathematics.

#### No property qualification and payment of MPs

The reasons for linking these two demands here may seem obvious: their enactment would remove the most glaring obstacles in the way of working-class entry into Parliament. Again, however, there was an important subtext not lost on contemporaries. The property qualification itself would be no great loss: it was only an eighteenth-century innovation, and by 1838 it was no longer necessary for the property to be held in land. What was new was the scale of the implications of these two demands for the actual nature of Parliament itself. By the 1830s Parliament had become a sort of club for people from the upper social circles. The implementation of these Chartist demands would open up Parliament to a wider range of people and turn an MP's position from a congenial public duty into a salaried post, virtually a job with wages.

#### Annual parliaments

Nowadays our democratic system seems to work well enough without the need for general elections every year, so it is difficult for us to see the point of this demand. The Chartists' thinking here is easier to understand if you look at the US electoral system. There, many more posts, including mayors and local law officers, are open to election than in Britain, and the length of each term of office is strictly laid down in the Constitution. This means that US public officials always operate with the need to win re-election at the front of their minds. This may or may not be a good idea, but frequent elections certainly place much greater power in the hands of the electorate, which was just what the Chartists wanted.

In the early nineteenth century the normal period between elections was seven years. However, the Reform Bill crisis and the deaths of George IV and William IV meant that by the time Lovett drew up this demand there had been an election almost every year: 1830, 1831, 1832, 1834, 1835 and 1837. In the circumstances, it made perfect sense for the Chartists to build on this experience and to suggest that this become the norm. After all, gaining the right to vote and stand for election would mean nothing without the frequent chance to use it.

#### Overemphasising the physical/moral force divide

\*\*\*\*\* Everyone likes things to be neat, and it is very tempting to divide the movement into two camps: the moral force Chartists, such as Lovett, who rejected violence, and the



### 3.3 Common student errors

physical force Chartists, such as O'Connor, who believed in using violence. Life, however, is never that simple. There were indeed two general schools of thought, as there tend to be in any movement, but they were never strictly demarcated. Lovett, for example, was quite prepared to sanction the use of force in self-defence. Equally, although there were Chartists who were prepared to use force, there was no attempt at a planned, armed insurrection or revolution. Almost all the examples of the use of force were in response either to the rejection of the Chartist petitions or to the arrest of leading Chartists. The one major exception was the Newport Rising, although it is questionable whether this was actually an attempt at a rising at all. Even in 1848, the year of European revolution, the Chartists were impeccably law-abiding: O'Connor obeyed the command of the authorities that the crowd on Kennington Common be dispersed, and the great petition made its way through the Duke of Wellington's defences to Parliament not at the head of a great procession but in three hansom cabs.

#### Only knowing about the petitions

\*\*\*\*\* To be fair, most students are aware that there is more to Chartism than the petitions, but there is often vagueness about its other elements. Below is a brief guide to the major features of the movement.

#### The Chartist National Convention

This was the Chartists' 'anti-parliament'. It was an elected assembly that debated and passed motions along the lines of the House of Commons. Its elected delegates put MC (Member of the Convention) after their names, just as members of the House of Commons put MP after theirs. The name 'Convention' had obvious connotations with the National Convention that had governed Revolutionary France during the Terror. The first Chartist Convention met in London in 1839. Its electoral system was a lot fairer than the parliamentary system, although there were still accusations that London was over-represented. For the most part, the Convention debated Chartist strategy and tactics — for example, how many signatures the 1839 petition ought to carry before it went before Parliament, and how extra signatures were to be obtained.

The Convention brought together Chartists from all over the country, but it never really succeeded in overcoming the strong regional loyalties within the movement. Many of the splits between moral force and physical force Chartists actually occurred at the Convention. The first assembly broke down when moderate groups, from Birmingham and Scotland, left in protest at the more extreme ideas being put forward by George Harney. Since the radicals tended to be based in London, O'Connor moved the Convention from London to Birmingham. It met there again in 1842 and 1843, when it debated — but rejected — the idea of merging with the middle-class Complete Suffrage Union. In 1845 and 1848 it moved back to London to regulate the Land Plan and to co-ordinate the third petition. After 1848 the Convention moved to Manchester, but by that time it lacked the numbers and influence to have much impact on events.

#### *Northern Star*

Newspapers were the lifeblood of any working-class movement, and the *Northern Star* was the best known of those that carried the Chartist message. It was set up in Leeds by O'Connor, who had established a strong personal following in Yorkshire. The name signified the North or Pole Star, by which mariners are guided, and at its peak in 1839 it was selling in the region of 50,000 copies a week. In 1845 George Harney took over the paper and turned it into a more radical, republican organ. Sales revived, but in 1849 Harney quarrelled with O'Connor and left to start the more radical *Red Republican* in



### 3.3 Common student errors

1850. He briefly returned as editor of the *Northern Star* in 1852 and changed its name to *Star of Freedom*, but like Chartism, it was dying fast and closed a few months later.

#### The Sacred Month

Also known as the ‘National Holiday’, this was a plan to put pressure on employers by calling a general strike and by forcing factory gates to close to prevent any substitute workers from filling the gap. Originally intended to last a month, in August 1839 the Chartist Convention reduced it to a three-day ‘Holiday’. The plan, however, had little working-class support, and by no means all Chartists were convinced that it was a useful tactic. Some factories did close briefly, but the strike quickly collapsed.

#### The Newport Rising

There is still considerable confusion over this event, which undoubtedly served to link Chartism with violence in many people’s minds. It is important to be informed of the events leading up to it. The first Chartist petition was presented to Parliament in May 1839. Remember that no one then knew it was ‘the first’ petition — to them it was *the* petition, the fruit of much debate and excitement, and expectations surrounding it were accordingly very high. Even though it was presented by an MP (Thomas Attwood), it was obvious from the outset that Parliament was not going to give the Chartists a fair hearing. Immediately, some of the Chartists began to devise other tactics — it was at this point, for example, that plans were set on foot for the ‘Sacred Month’ strikes. Then, in July 1839, a Chartist meeting was held at the Bull Ring in Birmingham, where the Chartist National Convention had recently reconvened after its problems in London. The meeting was attacked by a large contingent of police brought up specially from London. The similarity to Peterloo 20 years earlier was unmistakable, and this was compounded when Lovett and John Collins were arrested and imprisoned for writing a pamphlet criticising the authorities’ actions at the Bull Ring. To add insult to injury, Parliament then rejected the Chartist petition with obvious contempt, by 235 votes to 46. In August, the authorities launched a clampdown, arresting Chartist leaders and imprisoning them. To all intents and purposes, it looked as if the authorities had declared war on the Chartists, and that they had won.

Disappointment is a much underrated emotion, and when hopes have been built up high, it can be very powerful. By the autumn of 1839 there was a wave of anger in Chartist circles at the way they had been treated. ‘If they Peterloo us’, went one slogan, ‘we’ll Moscow them’ — a reference to the way the Russian people had burned Moscow to the ground and forced Napoleon and all his army to retreat. There is no evidence at all of any national plan to stage an insurrection, but Chartists in Newport did plan some sort of local rising. They gathered a large armed party with guns and pikes (pikes were commonly used as weapons since they were relatively easy to make and could provide protection against a cavalry attack) and marched on the town.

Most risings and rebellions in history begin as local affairs, with few of those involved necessarily having any wider goal in view. This does seem to have been the case at Newport. The Chartists were led by John Frost, a prominent local figure and a delegate to the Chartist Convention. The marchers were met by troops near the Westgate Hotel and a gun battle followed. Some twenty marchers were killed and Frost was arrested and tried for treason. He was found guilty and sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered, but this was commuted to transportation for life.

Newport was probably indicative of the level of anger and frustration felt in Chartist circles at the way their constitutional approach had failed in 1839. It was used by

### 3.3 Common student errors

Chartism's opponents as proof that the whole movement was inclined toward violence, but there is no real evidence to support the claim. It certainly disillusioned many of Chartism's middle-class supporters — Attwood, for example, left the Chartist movement over the issue.

#### **Complete Suffrage Union (CSU)**

This was a movement established in 1841 by Joseph Sturge, a Quaker manufacturer from Birmingham, to argue for a more moderate reform of Parliament than that proposed by the Charter. Sturge enjoyed the support of the Anti-Corn Law League leaders, Richard Cobden and John Bright, and he spent the year of 1842 trying to persuade the Chartists to abandon the Charter and join the CSU instead. In the spring of 1842 William Lovett agreed to attend a meeting of the CSU at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in London, but he did not give way on the Charter: in fact, he argued that the CSU should accept the Charter in its entirety. O'Connor, on the other hand, called the London meeting the 'Fox and Goose Club', with Sturge and his Anti-Corn Law friends as the greedy foxes and Lovett as the silly goose who would be plucked, cooked and eaten if he was not careful.

Sturge was no doubt well intentioned, but there was little prospect of an alliance between the Chartists and the middle class, especially as 1842 was the year of the 'Plug Plot' attacks on factories: both the Anti-Corn Law League and the CSU were made up, of course, of factory owners. In the end, however, with Lovett virtually forced out of the Chartist movement, O'Connor got rid of the CSU by the simple expedient of joining it and taking it over. In August 1842 he spoke in support of Sturge at a by-election and in December he attended a joint meeting of the Chartists and the CSU. The Chartists persuaded the CSU to accept the whole Charter; thereafter, there was no need for a separate organisation and the CSU voted itself out of existence.

#### **The Plug Plot**

This is a slightly homely euphemism for the outbreak of industrial sabotage that followed the rejection of the 1842 parliamentary petition. The petition was rejected in May; the summer that followed brought a severe economic depression, with high unemployment and wage cuts for those in employment. The plan was to force employers to offer better wages by calling the men out on strike and by rendering the steam engines that ran the factory machinery inoperable through the removal of the plugs from the boilers. The method was similar to the Luddite tactics of the 1810s. The authorities reacted vigorously, arresting the 'plug plotters' and imposing severe jail sentences. The Plug Plot also helped to finalise the split between O'Connor and Lovett, who had virtually withdrawn from Chartism by the end of 1842.

#### **Knowledge Chartism**

This was a movement led by Lovett and John Collins which aimed to extend working-class education as a necessary precursor to achieving political reform. They put their idea down in *Chartism: A New Organisation of the People*, which they wrote while in prison in Warwick after the failure of the 1839 petition. The failure of that petition convinced Lovett that the working classes would never be taken seriously until they enjoyed the same educational advantages as the middle classes. O'Connor was scornful of the idea and dubbed it 'Knowledge Chartism'. Although Lovett and Collins's vision had little impact on the future development of Chartism, it did survive in the movement for working-class education in the later years of the century.



### 3.3 Common student errors

#### Teetotal Chartism

This was a movement led by Robert Lowery to promote teetotalism among Chartists. O'Connor, who had always tended to reject what he saw as distractions from the main struggle, was contemptuous of it, but Lowery was tapping into a major Victorian preoccupation: the Temperance Movement was one of the most active and widespread Victorian pressure groups. Sobriety went hand-in-hand with respectability, and Lowery reckoned, with some cause, that a commitment to abstain from alcohol was more likely than anything else to convince the middle classes that the working classes could be trusted with the vote. The movement had a core of dedicated supporters, but never achieved the breadth of support Lowery had hoped for.

#### Church Chartism

Rather like the anti-slavery movement or the civil-rights movement in the USA in the 1950s and 1960s, there was a strong Christian element to the Chartist movement and to its rhetoric. The Chartists firmly believed that their struggle for working rights was in line with the message of the gospels, and a favourite Chartist activity was to attend Church services, occupy the private pews reserved for rich families and enjoin the vicar to preach on a suitable biblical passage stressing the equality of all before God or the duties of the rich to help the poor. The Methodist minister J. R. Stephens used his pulpit to preach fiery sermons against the excesses of the wealthy and in support of the Charter.

The Christian element within Chartism was particularly important because the Church of England was so closely associated with the Tory political establishment. There was even a move to establish 'Chartist' churches, which enjoyed some success in 1839, especially in Scotland. Church Chartism was never likely to take over the movement — and, predictably, O'Connor was critical of it — but it was a significant part.

#### The Chartist Land Scheme

O'Connor was the leading figure within the Chartist Land Scheme, which, in view of his rejection of other 'distractions' from the suffrage issue, is ironic since the Chartist Land Scheme was probably the largest Chartist 'distraction' of all. The idea behind it was to set up a land company by popular subscription which would buy land for a series of 'Chartist villages' to be run along lines of equality and self-sufficiency. It was hoped that subscribers to the company would settle in the villages, although few did. The first site, near Rickmansworth, was named O'Connorville; other sites were purchased in Worcestershire and Gloucestershire, at Lowbands, Snig's End, Minster Lovell ('Charterville') and Great Dodford.

Historians have tended to be dismissive of these villages, and indeed they were not on the whole successful. In 1848 Parliament appointed a select committee to investigate allegations of fraud against O'Connor in his managing of the scheme, and although it acquitted him of any wrongdoing, it did reveal serious levels of incompetence in the administering of the villages. O'Connor actually had to evict the tenants of Charterville for non-payment of rent. The whole scheme collapsed and the land company was finally wound up in 1851.

Although a failure, the scheme does reveal the depth of the Chartists' radicalism. Their vision of the future entailed overturning the basis of landed society and returning to the sort of people's communes that they imagined had existed in the past and would in due course be established in Soviet Russia and Communist China.



## 3.4 Profile exercise

# Leading figures of the Chartist movement

Chartism existed at both national and local or regional levels. Some figures became prominent as leaders of the national movement, and these tend to be the ones most students trot out in essays — principally William Lovett and Feargus O'Connor. However, there were other Chartists who were essentially local figures but who had an impact on the fortunes of the movement as a whole: John Frost, for example, whose local position in south Wales led ultimately to the Newport Rising, an event which coloured many people's perception of the movement.

Use these short biographical sketches to get a good overview of the more important Chartists, and then use the tasks at the end to help you fit this information into your thinking about the movement as a whole.

### **William Lovett (1800–77)**

Lovett came from Cornwall but moved to London as a young man. He learned a trade as a cabinet-maker, to read and write in night classes, and got involved in radical politics. He became secretary of the British Association for the Promotion of Co-operative Knowledge, and in 1831 he helped form the National Union of the Working Classes which argued for universal suffrage during the Reform Bill crisis. He was dissatisfied with the 1832 Reform Act and, together with the radical editor Henry Hetherington, became one of the founder members of the London Working Men's Association (LWMA). He helped the LWMA draft the People's Charter and was secretary to the first Chartist National Convention, which met in February 1839. He was arrested for a pamphlet he co-authored with John Collins attacking the police for using force against a Chartist meeting at the Bull Ring in Birmingham, and he spent 12 months in prison in Warwick. His relations with O'Connor grew steadily worse because of their disagreements over the use of force.

### **Feargus O'Connor (1794–1855)**

O'Connor came from a wealthy Protestant Irish family which had been active in the movement for an independent Ireland in the 1790s. He worked as a lawyer and was elected MP for Cork in 1832. At first he was a keen supporter of Daniel O'Connell's movement for the repeal of the Irish Act of Union, but he disagreed with his compromise with the Melbourne government (the Lichfield House Compact of 1836). He moved away from the Irish nationalist movement and got involved with radical political groups such as Lovett's National Union of the Working Classes. He was deprived of his parliamentary seat in 1835 when it was shown that he lacked the necessary property qualification. In 1837 he set up the *Northern Star*, originally to campaign against the Poor Law, but in time it became the main Chartist paper. In 1839 he was elected to the Chartist National Convention and in 1841 imprisoned for 18 months for seditious libel. He became associated with arguments favouring the use of force, which caused a split between him and Lovett. He favoured sticking closely to the franchise issue, but after the failure of the 1842 petition his time was increasingly taken up with the Chartist Land Scheme. The Chartist villages proved



### 3.4 Profile exercise

controversial: O'Connor was accused of corruption, and although he was eventually cleared, the affair took its toll on his health. He was at the forefront of the 1848 petition and it was he who presented it to Parliament. Thereafter, he seemed to go to pieces: he was declared insane in 1852 and died in 1855 in a mental asylum.

#### **Thomas Attwood (1783–1856)**

Attwood came from Birmingham from a successful iron-manufacturing family which had branched out into banking; finance and currency remained one of his major areas of concern. He was a firm believer in parliamentary reform and wanted to spread the franchise to the middle class. To that end, in 1830 he founded the Birmingham Political Union, which became one of the most important bodies campaigning for reform. He did declare that he was prepared to use force to achieve reform, but this may just have been rhetoric; in his later career he was firmly opposed to its use. He was elected MP for Birmingham in 1832 and soon converted to the need for further reform. He joined the Chartists in 1838 and presented the first Chartist petition. Shortly afterwards he became disillusioned with the movement, particularly with its readiness to use violence, withdrew his support and resigned from Parliament.

#### **John Collins (1802–52)**

Collins was a Birmingham artisan and an active figure in the Birmingham movement for parliamentary reform before 1832. He was arrested and imprisoned for a year with Lovett in Warwick prison for co-writing a pamphlet criticising the police for breaking up the Chartist meeting in the Birmingham Bull Ring. There the two men wrote *Chartism: A New Organisation of the People*. Unlike most of the leading Chartists, he supported the idea of linking up with the middle class to attain Chartist goals.

#### **James 'Bronterre' O'Brien (1805–64)**

O'Brien was a lawyer, a journalist and a highly successful editor of the *Poor Man's Guardian*, in which role he risked arrest for refusing to pay government stamp duty on the newspaper; 'Bronterre' was his pen name. He also contributed regularly to the *Northern Star* and was an able speaker, much in demand at Chartist meetings (O'Connor nicknamed him the 'Schoolmaster of Chartism'). He was arrested and acquitted in 1839, but rearrested shortly afterwards and served 18 months in prison. Through the 1840s he opposed O'Connor's Land Scheme, and relations between the two men gradually deteriorated until they were barely on speaking terms.

#### **John Frost (1784–1877)**

Frost was at the centre of the 1839 Newport Rising. He was a Newport man, the proprietor of a draper's shop in the town and deeply involved in town politics. A local magistrate, in 1837 he was elected mayor. He became a leading member of the 1839 Chartist National Convention, although it cost him his seat on the magistrates' bench — he was sacked by the home secretary. After the 1839 petition was rejected, he led the march on Newport that became known as the Newport Rising. Arrested and imprisoned on a charge of high treason, his death sentence was commuted to transportation for life, and he spent 14 years as a convict in Tasmania before obtaining a conditional pardon in 1854. He was given a free pardon and allowed to return to England after the Crimean War, in 1856.



### 3.4 Profile exercise

#### Robert Lowery (1809–63)

Lowery was a Geordie, born in North Shields. He started life as a sailor but moved into tailoring — a trade closely associated with radical politics — and represented Newcastle at the first Chartist Convention. He became a journalist on the radical newspaper the *Northern Liberator*, and was an active Chartist speaker, particularly in Scotland. He was a firm believer in the importance of the moral force approach, and a leading figure in the ‘teetotal Chartism’ movement.

#### Joseph Rayner Stephens (1805–79)

J. R. Stephens was a radical Methodist minister and a leading Chartist. He was chiefly concerned with the social-justice ends of the movement rather than with its purely political aims: it was he who coined the phrase ‘knife and fork question’ to describe the state of Chartism in Lancashire. Of all the Chartists, he came the closest to being a genuine insurrectionist. Even before the Charter was drawn up he advocated the use of physical force directly rather than simply in self-defence. In 1838 he was arrested and sentenced to 18 months in prison.

#### George Harney (1817–97)

Harney was one of the most radical of the Chartists. As a young man he had been imprisoned for helping to distribute the *Poor Man’s Guardian*, its editor having broken the law by refusing to pay government stamp duty. Harney was an enthusiastic supporter of the ideas of Thomas Paine and helped set up the East London Democratic Association in 1837, an organisation which supported the use of violence. Harney was a fiery orator and a firm believer in forging links with European revolutionary movements. He came into his own in the later years of Chartism. As editor of the *Northern Star* from 1845, he revived its flagging sales and invited Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to contribute to it. O’Connor disagreed with Harney’s links with European revolutionaries, and the two men split over the issue. Harney relaunched the *Northern Star* in 1852 as the *Star of Freedom*, but by then support for Chartism had sunk to very low levels and the paper had to close.

#### Ernest Jones (1819–69)

Jones was a lawyer and a late convert to Chartism, only joining the movement after he met O’Connor in 1846. He was a member of the 1848 Chartist Convention and active in the preparation of the 1848 petition. After the failure of the petition, he was arrested and sentenced to two years’ solitary confinement for sedition and riot. He was a leading figure in Chartism in its twilight years in the 1850s and he became a follower of Karl Marx and his socialist philosophy.

#### Tasks

**1** Arrange these Chartist leaders in order of importance or significance.

NB You will need to be careful how you define importance and significance.

**2** Arrange these Chartist leaders on a credit/debit sheet, with those you think, on balance, benefited the movement under credit, and those you think, on balance, did the movement more harm than good under debit.



## 3.5 Primary document exercise

### The People's Charter

This was the precursor of Chartism and it reflects the original aims and ideas of the London Working Men's Association (LWMA), which Lovett had helped to found in 1836. The actual Charter was drawn up in 1838, based on the following petition (Document A). The Charter was presented to Parliament the following year, accompanied by a second petition (Document B).

#### Document A Petition agreed to at the 'Crown and Anchor' meeting, February 28th, 1837

.....

**To the Honourable the Commons of Great Britain and Ireland. The Petition of the undersigned Members of the Working Men's Association and others sheweth:** This was the usual form for drawing up a petition. Note the respectful language and tone.

**mutual consent:** As a proposition, this is more radical than it might appear. It means that laws are not binding unless the people agree to them, and the clear implication here is that the election of a parliament does not confer that consent. In short, as things stand, the people are under no obligation to obey any laws with which they disagree.

**the laws are only despotic enactments:** Despotic means tyrannical. This is another way of declaring that, since the law is unjust, ordinary people are under no obligation to obey it.

**as the creation and security of property are the consequences of society:** This attacks the principle of the rights of property, which the 1832 Act had been so concerned to defend. It states that property and its rights are governed by society, and not vice versa. In other words, the rights of the people come first and remain more important than the rights of property.

**To the Honourable the Commons of Great Britain and Ireland. The Petition of the undersigned Members of the Working Men's Association and others sheweth** — That the only *rational use* of the institutions and laws of society is justly to protect, encourage, and support all that can be made to contribute **to the happiness of all the people.**

That, as the object to be obtained is mutual benefit, so ought the enactment of laws to be by **mutual consent.**

That obedience to laws can only be **justly enforced** on the certainty that those who are called on to obey them have had, either personally or by their representatives, a power to enact, amend, or repeal them.

That all those who are excluded from this share of political power are not justly included within the operation of the laws; to them **the laws are only despotic enactments**, and the legislative assembly from whom they emanate can only be considered parties to an unholy compact, devising plans and schemes for taxing and subjecting the many.

**That the universal political right of every human being is superior and stands apart from all customs, forms, or ancient usage; a fundamental right not in the power of man to confer, or justly to deprive him of.**

That to take away this sacred right from the *person* and to vest it in *property*, is a wilful perversion of justice and common sense, **as the creation and security of property are the consequences of society** — the great object of which is human happiness.

...

**to the happiness of all the people:** There are echoes here of the American Declaration of Independence, which listed 'pursuit of happiness' as one of mankind's inalienable rights, and of the philosophy of Jeremy Bentham, that government exists to promote 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. Essentially, this is saying that government exists for the benefit of the people — and not the other way around.

**justly enforced:** In other words, at present, the law is unjustly enforced.

**That the universal political right of every human being is superior and stands apart from all customs, forms, or ancient usage; a fundamental right not in the power of man to confer, or justly to deprive him of:** Note the language of universal rights here — a legacy of the French revolutionaries and of their 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. What this is saying is that the basic human rights of each citizen override any other law or custom, however ancient and venerable it might be. This is aimed at the argument that the rights and privileges of the elite have existed since time immemorial and therefore should be regarded as sacred.



### 3.5 Primary document exercise

[proposes a law as follows:]

A LAW FOR EQUALLY REPRESENTING THE PEOPLE OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND

EQUAL REPRESENTATION

That the United Kingdom be divided into 200 electoral districts; dividing, as nearly as possible, an equal number of inhabitants; and that each district do send a representative to Parliament.

**every person:** Although this is followed by the use of 'his' and 'he', this crucial passage stipulates 'every person', which clearly includes women. This was changed to 'every male inhabitant of the realm' in the Charter itself.

UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE

That **every person** producing proof of his being 21 years of age, to the clerk of the parish in which he has resided six months, shall be entitled to have his name registered as a voter...

ANNUAL PARLIAMENTS

That a general election do take place on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June in each year, and that each vacancy be filled up to **a fortnight after it occurs...**

**a fortnight after it occurs:** Because of the slow speed of communications and transport, elections were usually held over a period of a fortnight, longer in some areas.

NO PROPERTY QUALIFICATIONS

That there shall be no property qualification for members; but on a requisition, signed by 200 voters, in favour of any candidate being presented to the clerk of the parish in which they reside, such candidate shall be put in nomination. ...

**They shall meet every day (during the Session) for business at 10 o'clock in the morning, and adjourn at 4:** Until the reforms brought in by Tony Blair in the 2000s, Parliament did not usually meet until the afternoon, and would sit for important business well into the night. In theory, this allowed government ministers to conduct ministerial business in the morning and parliamentary business in the afternoon, but in practice it allowed Parliament's many lawyers to carry on their legal work alongside their parliamentary duties. It also allowed those many MPs for whom attendance at Parliament was a handy excuse for enjoying the high life to sleep off the after-effects of the previous night's excesses. This demand was all part of the Chartists' attempts to change Parliament from an exclusive gentlemen's club into a working administrative body.

VOTE BY BALLOT

That each voter must vote in the parish in which he resides. That each parish provide as many balloting boxes as there are candidates proposed in the district; and that a temporary place be fitted up in each parish church for the purpose of *secret voting*. And, on the day of election, as each voter passes orderly on to the ballot, he shall have given to him, by the officer in attendance, **a balloting ball**, which he shall drop into the box of his favourite candidate.

**a balloting ball:** Voting by placing a balloting ball in a bag or box was, and still is, the usual method of voting in the exclusive clubs and societies of the rich. Here it would have the advantage of avoiding the problems a ballot paper might hold for those unable to read or write. However, it would almost certainly have meant that electoral officers would have known which candidate each person had voted for.

SITTINGS AND PAYMENTS TO MEMBERS

That the members do take their seats in Parliament on the first Monday in October next after their election, and continue their sittings every day (Sundays excepted) till the business of the sitting is terminated, but not later than the 1<sup>st</sup> of September. **They shall meet every day (during the Session) for business at 10 o'clock in the morning, and adjourn at 4.** And every member shall be paid quarterly out of the public treasury £400 a-year. That all electoral officers shall be elected by universal suffrage.



### 3.5 Primary document exercise

**Document B** This was the petition that actually accompanied the Charter to Parliament in 1839

**their suffering countrymen:** Although this is couched in the traditionally polite and humble language of the parliamentary petition, this note gives a hint of the tone of what will follow.

**three-and-twenty years:** i.e. since Waterloo (1815).

**the warehouse of the pawnbroker is full:** Pawnbrokers were people to whom the poor sold ('pawned') their goods in time of distress. In return, the poor were given a ticket with which they could buy back their goods if they had not been sold in the meantime. It was a form of moneylending, and if the pawnbrokers' warehouses were full it was a sign that things were very bad indeed.

**The good of a party:** This does not necessarily mean a political party — Whig or Tory — but a reference to the middle and upper classes as a whole.

**fond:** foolish, naïve.

#### NATIONAL PETITION

Unto the Honourable the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in Parliament assembled, the Petition of the undersigned, **their suffering countrymen,**

HUMBLY SHEWETH,

That we, your petitioners, dwell in a land whose merchants are noted for enterprise, whose manufacturers are very skilful, and whose workmen are proverbial for their industry.

The land itself is goodly, the soil rich, and the temperature wholesome; it is abundantly furnished with the materials of commerce and trade; it has numerous and convenient harbours; in facility of internal communication it exceeds all others.

For **three-and-twenty years** we have enjoyed a profound peace.

Yet, with all these elements of national prosperity, and with every disposition and capacity to take advantage of them, we find ourselves overwhelmed with public and private suffering.

**artificer:** a skilled workman.

We are bowed down under a load of taxes; which, notwithstanding, fall greatly short of the wants of our rulers; our traders are trembling on the verge of bankruptcy; our workmen are starving; capital brings no profit, and labour no remuneration; the home of the **artificer** is desolate, and **the warehouse of the pawnbroker is full;** the workhouse is crowded, and the manufactory is deserted.

We have looked on every side, we have searched diligently in order to find out the causes of a distress so sore and so long continued.

We can discover none in nature, or in **Providence.**

**Providence:** heaven. In other words, there is nothing either in nature or in the law of God to justify the continuing wealth of the rich over the poor.

Heaven has dealt graciously by the people; but the foolishness of our rulers has made the goodness of God of none effect.

The energies of a mighty kingdom have been wasted in building up the power of selfish and ignorant men, and its resources squandered for their **aggrandisement.**

**aggrandisement:** growth in power and wealth.

**The good of a party** has been advanced to the sacrifice of the good of the nation; the few have governed for the interest of the few, while the interest of the many has been neglected, or insolently and tyrannously trampled upon.

It was the **fond** expectation of the people that a remedy for the greater part, if not for the whole, of their grievances, would be found in the Reform Act of 1832.

They were taught to regard that Act as a wise means to a worthy end; as the machinery of an improved legislation...

They have been bitterly and basely deceived.

The fruit which looked so fair to the eye has turned to dust and ashes when gathered.

The Reform Act has effected a transfer of power from one domineering faction to another, and left the people as helpless as before. ...

WE DEMAND UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE.



### 3.5 Primary document exercise

**intimate:** meaning in this context that the electorate ought to exercise a close control over what Parliament does.

**The legislative and constituent powers:** i.e. Parliament and the electorate.

**the approbation of the constituency:** Approbation means approval. In other words, being elected by the constituency ought on its own to be enough to get a man into Parliament.

The suffrage to be exempt from the corruption of the wealthy, and the violence of the powerful, must be secret...

WE DEMAND THE BALLOT.

The connection between the representatives and the people, to be beneficial must be **intimate**.

**The legislative and constituent powers**, for correction and for instruction, ought to be brought into frequent contact. ...

To public safety as well as public confidence, frequent elections are essential.

WE DEMAND ANNUAL PARLIAMENTS.

...We demand that in the future election of members of your Honourable House, **the approbation of the constituency** shall be the sole qualification; and that to every representative so chosen, shall be assigned, out of the public taxes, a fair and adequate remuneration for the time which he is called upon to devote to the public service. ...

**Universal suffrage will, and it alone can, bring true and lasting peace to the nation; we firmly believe that it will also bring prosperity.**

**Universal suffrage will, and it alone can, bring true and lasting peace to the nation; we firmly believe that it will also bring prosperity:**  
This is the true message of Chartism. Before 1832 it was promised that political reform would lead to general happiness, but it didn't. The only way then to achieve social justice and the peace and prosperity that follows from it would be to pass a proper reform of Parliament.

#### Questions

- 1 How could the Whigs defend the 1832 Reform Act in the light of these Chartist criticisms?
- 2 What do these extracts reveal about:
  - (a) the strengths of the Chartist movement?
  - (b) the weaknesses of the Chartist movement?
- 3 What evidence do these extracts give that the Chartists were, in some ways, conservative in their outlook?
- 4 Which of the following statements are (a) proved, (b) suggested or (c) disproved by these extracts?

**Proved Suggested Disproved**

- |                          |                          |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | The Chartists were well educated and organised.                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | The Chartists were sympathetic to women's rights.                            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | The Chartists were too radical.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Chartism was driven by class hatred.   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | The Chartists were heavily influenced by the ideas of the French Revolution. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | The Chartists believed in God.   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | The Chartists wanted to deprive the rich of their property.                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | The Chartists did not trust politicians.                                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | The Chartists were naïve.  |

Once you have completed the above task, try to put your ideas into continuous prose — write two paragraphs explaining what you think these extracts tell us about the Chartists and their ideas.



## 3.6 Primary document exercise

### Two contrasting accounts of O'Connor

#### Document A

**The Great Birmingham Meeting:** a large meeting held to elect members to the first National Chartist Convention, which was to be held in London in February 1839.

**his Irish braggadocio:** Braggadocio means empty boasting. Note how Lovett plays on contemporary prejudices against the Irish.

**The Great Birmingham Meeting** on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August [1838] might be said to be the first *Chartist meeting* at which O'Connor introduced his physical force notions, or rather **his Irish braggadocio** about arming and fighting, for to fight himself formed no part of his **patriotism**; for when his mad folly subsequently incited violent commotion among 'his dear children', he shrank from personal consequences and **slunk over to Ireland**. His speech, at the meeting referred to, about 'fleshing swords to the hilt', having furnished our opponents with a daily text, and a keen weapon with which to assail us, made us anxious to prevent if possible a like exhibition at **our Palace Yard meeting**. Therefore in our instructions to the speakers appointed by our Association we requested them 'to keep as closely as possible to the two great questions of the meeting — *the Charter* and *the Petition*, — and as far as possible to avoid all extraneous matter or party politics, as well as every abusive or violent expression which may tend to injure our glorious cause'.

**patriotism:** an ironic reference to O'Connor's support for Irish nationalism.

**slunk over to Ireland:** O'Connor spent September 1839, following the Birmingham Bull Ring riots and the collapse of the Sacred Month and of the parliamentary petition, in Ireland.

**our Palace Yard meeting:** Palace Yard, next to the Houses of Parliament, was to be the venue for a Chartist meeting in September 1838 to elect the London representatives to the Chartist Convention. The Palace Yard meeting was more likely to be controlled by Lovett and the LWMA.

From William Lovett, *The Life and Struggles of William Lovett* (London, 1876).

#### Document B

The immense majority of Chartists in Leicester, as well as in many other towns, regarded [O'Connor] as the only really **disinterested** and incorruptible leader. I adopted this belief, because it was the belief of the people; and I opposed James Bronterre O'Brien and Henry Vincent, and all who opposed O'Connor, or refused to act with him.

**disinterested:** neutral, without a vested interest in each side (not to be confused with 'uninterested').

Common sense taught me that no cause can be gained by disunion. And as I knew no reason for doubting the political honesty and disinterestedness which O'Connor ever asserted for himself, and in which the people believed, I stuck by O'Connor, and would have gone through fire and water for him. There was much that was attractive in him when I first knew him. His fine manly form and powerful baritone voice gave him advantages as a popular leader. His conversation was rich in Irish humour, and often **evinced** a shrewd knowledge of character. The fact of his having been in the House of Commons, and among the upper classes, also lent him influence.

**evinced:** showed.

From Thomas Cooper, *The Life of Thomas Cooper*, ed. John Saville (Leicester University Press, 1971; first pub. 1872).

#### Notes

A Leicester journalist and Chartist supporter, Cooper took a more positive view of O'Connor.



### 3.6 Primary document exercise

#### Questions

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- 1** How does Lovett's language reveal his personal dislike of O'Connor?
  - 2** Is there any evidence here that Lovett is using hindsight?
  - 3** Is there any other evidence to support Lovett's contention that his differences with O'Connor went back to 1838?
  - 4** In what ways do Cooper's and Lovett's accounts of O'Connor agree?
  - 5** What do these extracts suggest about how important O'Connor was to the Chartist movement? (You will need to include Cooper's views about the other Chartist leaders here.)
  - 6** Is one of these extracts better evidence of O'Connor's character and importance than the other?
- 



## 3.7 Primary document exercise

### Chartism loses a champion

The Birmingham MP and manufacturer Thomas Attwood was one of the most important early converts to Chartism. Attwood was an enthusiastic supporter and even presented the first Chartist petition to Parliament. However, the violence that followed the petition's rejection disgusted him and turned him against the whole movement, as this extract makes clear.

#### Document A

**DISSENTERS:** also known as Nonconformists. Dissenters were Protestants who disliked or disagreed with the Church of England, often because they saw it as too closely linked to the interests of the rich. Dissenters belonged to a range of different denominations, especially the Baptist and Methodist churches, and tended to meet in small, plainly decorated chapels, rather than in large, ornate churches.

**GENERAL CONVENTION:** the Chartist National Convention which met in London in February 1839. It quickly revealed the split between the moderate Birmingham Chartists and the more radical groups based in London.

By the constant pressure of **an immense political engine** of this kind, *legally and ably directed*, they could not possibly have failed to produce effect. But instead of pursuing this line of conduct, they first issued a proclamation about **DISSENTERS** and **the CHURCH!!** They then ran throughout the nation, scattering terror and alarm, and discord and division wherever they went. Instead of attracting the confidence of the **MIDDLE CLASSES**, and completing the cordial **UNION** and co-operation of the **ELECTORS and NON-ELECTORS** of the nation, *upon which the success of their cause depended*, they disgusted, alarmed, alienated, and drove away the former from the latter; and thus all hope of success was destroyed. In my judgment it was quite impossible for any body of men to have done more mischief to the public cause, than was done by the **GENERAL CONVENTION** of the industrious classes, within three months of their assembling in London. They destroyed all possibility of its success in *their own hands*; **they broke up and scattered to the winds all the great moral machinery** which might possibly have enabled it to be taken up and worked successfully *in other hands*; and they gave a powerful argument into the hands of their opponents, to prove that **UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE**, when obtained, *if it produced no better men than themselves* would be little better than **UNIVERSAL MADNESS**.

**an immense political engine:** i.e. a mass political pressure group.

**the CHURCH:** i.e. the Church of England. The Church was closely identified with the interests of the ruling classes.

**ELECTORS and NON-ELECTORS:** Since non-electors were overwhelmingly working class, Attwood is here suggesting that the Chartists should have aimed at a grand alliance of the middle and working classes. The implication is that the electors could have used their votes to further the cause of the non-electors.

**they broke up and scattered to the winds all the great moral machinery:** Attwood is here speaking metaphorically: he means that the Chartists had squandered any moral advantage they might have enjoyed from proceeding in a more moderate fashion. The imagery is carefully chosen because it suggests that the Chartists were acting, in effect, like Luddites.

Thomas Attwood writing in the *Birmingham Journal*, 11 June 1841.

#### Questions

- 1 What might have been the main points of a Chartist response to Attwood's complaints?
- 2 'This passage proves that the Chartists' greatest mistake was not enrolling and maintaining middle-class support.' Does it? Explain your answer very carefully.
- 3 Does this extract suggest that Attwood's judgment about Chartism can be relied upon, or was it just a bad case of sour grapes?
- 4 Attwood is attacking Chartist tactics, but he is not actually rejecting their principles. Do you think he was right, therefore, to leave the movement?



## 3.8 Primary document exercise

### The 1842 petition

The Whig MP and historian Thomas Babington Macaulay had made his name by persuading the House of Commons to vote for the Reform Bill on the basis of ‘Reform that you may preserve’ or, to put it in plainer terms, ‘accept moderate reform in order to prevent anything more radical’. Ten years later he spoke against just such a more radical measure when he opposed the motion to accept the Chartist petition.

#### Document A

**to represent the Government as being able to do, and as bound to attempt that which no Government ever attempted:** Government in those days did remarkably little in comparison with modern governments. Macaulay sees in the Chartist demands the implication that the government should take a much more active role in people’s lives.

**the moment you give them absolute, supreme, irresistible power:** ‘Them’ refers to the working classes — note the ‘us’ and ‘them’ imagery used here.

**capital and accumulated property is to be placed absolutely at the foot of labour:** Capital refers to the industrialist classes and accumulated property to the landed aristocracy; ‘labour’ was a standard short-hand term for the working classes. Macaulay has picked up on the revolutionary implications of the Chartist programme.

There has been a constant and systematic attempt for years **to represent the Government as being able to do, and as bound to attempt that which no Government ever attempted;** and instead of the Government being represented, as is the truth, as being supported by the people, **it has been treated as if the Government supported the people:** it has been treated as if the Government possessed some mine of wealth — some extraordinary means of supplying the wants of the people; as if they could give them bread from the clouds — water from the rocks — **to increase the bread and the fishes five thousandfold.** Is it possible to believe that **the moment you give them absolute, supreme, irresistible power,** they will forget all this? You propose to give them supreme power; in every constituent body throughout the empire **capital and accumulated property is to be placed absolutely at the foot of labour.** ...What must be the effect of such a sweeping confiscation of property? No experience enables us to guess at it. All I can say is, that it seems to me to be something more horrid than can be imagined. A great community of human beings — a vast people would be called into existence in a new position; there would be a depression, if not an utter stoppage of trade, and of all those vast engagements of the country by which our people were supported, and how is it possible to doubt that famine and pestilence would come before long to wind up the effects of such a system. The best thing which I can expect, and which I think every one must see as a result, is, that in some of the desperate struggles which must take place in such a state of things, **some strong military despot must arise,** and give some sort of protection — some security to the property which may remain. But if you flatter yourselves that after such an occurrence you would ever see again those institutions under which you have lived, you deceive yourselves: you would never see them again, and you would never deserve to see them.

**it has been treated as if the Government supported the people:** This is the heart of the matter. The Chartists did indeed believe that government existed for the general good of the people; Macaulay is denying that.

**to increase the bread and the fishes five thousandfold:** This is a reference to the biblical story in which Jesus fed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fishes. Macaulay is suggesting that the Chartists are expecting miracles.

**some strong military despot must arise:** This would have reminded Macaulay’s audience (and Macaulay was himself a historian) of Edmund Burke’s famous prediction in 1790 that the chaos of the French Revolution would eventually throw up a military tyrant — as it did in the person of Napoleon. The comparison with the French Revolution is quite deliberate.

**Thomas Babington Macaulay speaking in Parliament on the Charter, in Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates Vol. LXIII 5 May 1842.**



### 3.8 Primary document exercise

#### Questions

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- 1 How well has Macaulay understood Chartism?
- 2 Does this extract prove that Chartism was a revolutionary force?
- 3 Macaulay does not draw on examples to support his points. What examples could he have offered?
- 4 'This extract shows that opposition to Chartism was essentially selfish.'  
'Macaulay was a scaremonger, and this extract shows it.'

Which of these judgments do you think is closer to the truth?

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## 3.9 Primary document and cartoon exercise

### Chartism and violence

Nothing did the Chartists more harm than the accusation that they were prepared to use violence to further their aims. In the first two extracts below, two Chartists give their versions of events surrounding the Plug Plot of 1842 and the outbreak of violence that accompanied it. Two years earlier, a wave of Chartist unrest had swept northern England; in the third extract, a Chartist prisoner recounts his (apparently unwilling) involvement in these risings. A cartoon from *Punch* magazine presents a more humorous view of the Chartists' association with violence.

#### Document A

.....

**who did not conceal their purpose of driving the people to desperation, in order to paralyse the Government:** Chartists were deeply suspicious of what they saw as the selfish motives of the Anti-Corn Law League. The suggestion here is that the manufacturers would welcome, or even deliberately produce, economic distress — with all its consequences for the poor — if it helped put pressure on the government to repeal the Corn Laws.

**had been a member of the First Convention:** Delegates to the Chartist Convention wrote 'MC' after their names, the equivalent of 'MP', and were held in great respect by working people.

**they had got the hands out:** i.e. they had got the workers ('hands') to come out on strike.

'The Plug Plot', of 1842, as it is still called in Lancashire, began in reductions of wages by the Anti-Corn-Law manufacturers, **who did not conceal their purpose of driving the people to desperation, in order to paralyse the Government.** The people advanced at last, to a wild general strike, and drew the plugs so as to stop the works at the mills, and thus render labour impossible. Some wanted the men who spoke at the meetings held at the beginning of the strike to propose resolutions in favour of Corn Law Repeal; but they refused. ...

I constituted myself chairman of the meeting on the Crown Bank, at Hanley, on Monday morning, the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, 1842, a day to be remembered to my life's end. I resolved to take the chief responsibility on myself, for what was about to be done. I told the people so. I suppose there would be eight or ten thousand present. I showed them that if they carried out the resolution which was about to be proposed, no government on earth could resist their demand. But I told them that 'Peace, Law, and Order' must be their motto; and that, while they took peaceable means to secure a general turn-out, and kept from violence, no law could touch them.

John Richards, who was seventy years of age and **had been a member of the First Convention**, — the oldest Chartist leader in the Potteries, — proposed the Resolution, 'That all labour cease until the People's Charter becomes the law of the land.'

A Hanley Chartist, whose name I forget, seconded it, and when I put the resolution to the crowd all hands seemed to be held up for it; and not one hand was held up when I said 'On the contrary'. Three cheers were given for success, and the meeting broke up.

I went to my lodging at the George and Dragon, to remain till the evening, when I should lecture in the room, according to the printed announcement. But I had not been many minutes in the inn, before a man came in with a wild air of joy, and said **they had got the hands out** at such and such an employer's; others followed; and then one said the crowd had gone to Squire Allen's, to seize a stand of arms that had belonged to the Militia. And then another came, and said the arms were at Bailey Rose's; and they had gone thither for them; and then another said they had done neither. ...I went out into the street, and had not gone many yards when I saw a company of infantry, marching, with fixed bayonets, and two magistrates on horseback accompanying their officers, apparently in the direction of Longton. ...

### 3.9 Primary document and cartoon exercise

The day wore on, wearily, and very anxiously, till about five in the afternoon, when parties of men began to pass along the streets. Some came into my inn, and began to relate the history of the doings at Longton, which had been very violent indeed. Yet the accounts they gave were confused, and I had still no clear understanding of what had been done.

By six o'clock, thousands crowded into the large open space about the Crown Inn, and instead of lecturing at eight o'clock in the room, the committee thought I had better go out at once, and lecture on the Crown Bank. So I went at seven o'clock to the place where I had stood in the morning. Before I began, some of the men who were drunk, and who, it seems, had been in the riot at Longton, came round me and wanted to shake hands with me. But I shook them off, **and told them I was ashamed to see them.** I began by telling the immense crowd — for its numbers were soon countless — that I had heard there had been destruction of property that day, and I warned all who had participated in that act, that they were not the friends, but the enemies of freedom — that ruin to themselves and others must attend this strike for the Charter, if they who pretended to be its advocates broke the law.

**and told them I was ashamed to see them:**

As well as violence, nothing tarnished the Chartist image quite as much as drunkenness.

'I proclaim Peace, Law, and Order!' I cried at the highest pitch of my voice. 'You all hear me; and I warn you of the folly and wrong you are committing, if you do not preserve Peace, Law, and Order!'

At dusk, I closed the meeting; but I saw the people did not disperse; and two pistols were fired off in the crowd. No policeman had I seen the whole day! And what had become of the soldiers I could not learn. I went back to my inn; but I began to apprehend that mischief had begun which it would not be easy to quell.

From Thomas Cooper, *The Life of Thomas Cooper*, ed. John Saville (Leicester University Press, 1971; first pub. 1872).

#### Document B

In 1842, four years after I left the factory, **the 'great strike'** took place, an event which some of our neighbours had been expecting a long time before, and were, in their way, prepared to meet. During the four years Chartism had been rife, and the strike was its culmination. The *Northern Star*, the only newspaper that appeared to circulate anywhere, found its way weekly to the cut [canal] side, being subscribed for by my father and five others. Every Sunday morning these subscribers met at our house to hear what prospect there was of the expected **'smash-up'** taking place. It was my task to read aloud so that all could hear at the same time; and the comments that were made on the events apparently foreshadowed would have been exceedingly edifying to me were I to hear them now. A Republic was to take the place of the 'base, bloody and brutal Whigs', and the usurpers of all civil rights, the Lords. **The Queen was to be dethroned, and the president of a Republic take her place.** This would be a very easy task. Ten thousand trained pikemen would sweep England

**'the great strike':** i.e. the 'Sacred Month'.

**'smash-up':** We would probably say 'show-down', i.e. the big clash between the strikers and the police or army.

**The Queen was to be dethroned, and the president of a Republic take her place:** There were republicans among the Chartists' ranks, and there was general detestation of the House of Lords; however, republicanism was never official Chartist policy.



### 3.9 Primary document and cartoon exercise

**pikes:** Pikes were easily fashioned from industrial and agricultural tools, as this extract suggests. Although pikes could provide good defence against cavalry, they were no defence against firearms, so the idea of thousands of pikes sweeping the country was always a shade fanciful.

through; and Hollinwood could furnish a continent of at least a thousand. ...Besides reading the *Northern Star* on Sunday mornings, my Saturday afternoons were occupied by more arduous work. I had to turn my father's grindstone while rebelliously-disposed amateur soldiers ground their **pikes**. Had he refused the use of the grindstone he might have been suspected of being a traitor to their cause. I remember well the faces of the men who brought pikes to be ground, **and their neglect to give me any remuneration for my labour**. But what did that matter, they were patriots, and things would come round in grand style some day.

**their neglect to give me any remuneration for my labour:** This is rather unusual. Revolutionaries tend to be surprisingly good about paying for the things they use: the European revolutionaries of 1848 paid the workers who built their barricades; the IRA men of 1916 all paid their bus fares into the centre of Dublin to stage the Easter Rising, and Lenin and the Bolsheviks made sure they returned their library books before setting off for Russia to stage the revolution of 1917.

From Benjamin Brierley, *Home Memories and Recollections of a Life (Manchester, 1886)*.

#### Notes

Brierley was not a Chartist speaker like Cooper but a rank-and-file supporter, and his account of how things were at village level gives a different perspective.

#### Document C

**assizes:** Trials held in provincial and regional courts by judges sent out from London.

**the *Star* newspaper:** i.e. the *Northern Star*.

I was called up at night and when I came down a gun was put into my hands. I don't know who gave it to me. I wish I had. If I had known it at York [i.e. at his trial at York **assizes**] it would have been told. I went downstairs and saw a man who told me to follow him. I did so for about 200 yards and there I saw a lot of men who bade me go into the market place with them — one gave me a gun. I asked several questions — there seemed no one appointed to lead. We went into the market place and as soon as I saw the constables I set off — but I was caught. I had been at the Meetings. I was a Chartist only by reading **the *Star* newspaper**. I had heard my neighbours talk of a rising — they had fixed it many a day. I was no physical force Chartist altho' there is sorry appearance of it, I own. I will take care I do not get into prison again for such an offence — it will learn me experience.

Notes by Captain W. J. Williams, Inspector of Prisons, of a conversation with a Chartist prisoner, Emmanuel Hutton of Bradford, 23 December 1840.

#### Notes

Hutton was caught up in the Chartist disturbances that swept northern England, including Bradford, in that year.



### 3.9 Primary document and cartoon exercise

**Document D** A physical force Chartist arming for the fight, 1848 (John Leech)



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**Note**

This cartoon attempts to present a ridiculous picture of a Chartist setting off for a day's violent agitation, all trussed up in an impressive array of kitchenware — his 'armour'. Note his dutiful lady wife making sure everything is nicely tucked in. Humour does not necessarily mean that people do not take the subject seriously — there were plenty of jokes and cartoons about Hitler during the Second World War — and it can be a sign of defiance.

**Questions**

- 1 Construct a timeline of the events that Cooper describes in Document A.
- 2 Prepare a prosecution statement on the basis of Cooper's account of events. How strong is the evidence in Document A that the violence was actually prompted by support for the Charter?
- 3 What does Document B tell us about the way the Chartists gathered news?
- 4 How seriously should we take Brierley's talk of overturning the government and the queen and setting up a republic?
- 5 How significant is the evidence of men preparing pikes at Brierley's father's house?
- 6 To what extent does Brierley's account tally with the picture of Chartism given by Thomas Cooper?
- 7 Do you believe Hutton's account in Document C? Say why (or why not).
- 8 Why do you think the government did not ban the *Northern Star*? Was the government wise not to?
- 9 What attitude toward the Chartists is *Punch* displaying in Document D?

