

Chartism

The Chartist movement is one of the most important working-class political movements in British history. Here, we explore the differing approaches that historians have taken to Chartism

Class

The first histories of the movement were written by Chartists themselves, for example Robert Gammage's *History of the Chartist Movement*, published in 1854. These emphasised class tensions between the working-class activists and the middle-class who had benefited from political reform but wanted to exclude those lower down the social scale.

The importance of Chartism to the development of class consciousness was echoed by twentieth-century (often Marxist) commentators. However, in the 1980s and 1990s historians such as Gareth Stedman Jones and Patrick Joyce, analysing the language of Chartism, started to discount the primacy of class and argue the movement should be explained in terms of politics rather than class conflict.

Today, historians usually adopt a more nuanced view of the political, cultural and linguistic dimensions of class rather than defining it solely in economic terms. As such, most recognise class still has a part to play in understanding Chartism.

Gender

The role of women in the Chartist campaigns has offered historians early examples of female political activism. Feminist historians, such as Dorothy Thompson, writing in the 1970s, presented a relatively pessimistic view of the role of women suggesting they were marginalised by male protestors and performed auxiliary duties such as making tea, fund-raising and collecting signatures. More recent writers, for example Malcolm Chase and Anna Clark, have taken a more positive view, seeing female participation as fundamental to shaping the movement. Female Chartists took part in violent uprisings and strikes as well as acting as lecturers and running associated organisations such as Chartist temperance and religious groups.

Culture

As political and gender historians have developed a richer and more sophisticated understanding of Chartism, they have uncovered its contribution to the development of a new and dynamic form of political culture and shed light on the everyday lives of ordinary working-class men, women and children. Alongside the petitions, rallies and industrial action were concerts, Sunday schools, dances and lecture tours. Working-class homes were decorated with prints from the Chartist newspaper, the *Northern Star*, which published poetry and short stories alongside political speeches and pamphlets.

1836 June
London Working Men's Association founded

1839 May
Rebecca Riots in Wales

1839 November
Commons rejects first national petition; many Chartists imprisoned; Newport Rising

1840 July
National Charter Association founded

1842 August–September
Plug Plots

1845 April
O'Connor launches Chartist Land Cooperative Society

1848 February
Mass meeting at Kennington Common, London

1855 August
Death of O'Connor

1830

1835

1840

1845

1850

1855

1860

1838 May
People's Charter published. It consisted of six points:

- universal adult male suffrage
- secret ballot
- no property qualifications for MPs
- payment of MPs
- equal-sized constituencies
- annual parliaments

1839 July
Bull Ring Riots in Birmingham

1840 January
Sheffield Rising

1842 May
Commons reject second Chartist petition

1843 March
Feargus O'Connor and other Chartist leaders go on trial. They are acquitted of main charges

1847 July
O'Connor elected MP for Nottingham, the only Chartist to sit in the Commons

1848 May
Third national petition presented but laughed out of Commons; widespread Chartist unrest, large number of arrests and leaders imprisoned

1858 February
Last National Chartist Convention

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