

Westhoughton Local History Group

LOCAL HISTORY GROUP UNCOVERS WESTHOUGHTON'S UNIQUE AND FASCINATING LINKS TO THE PETERLOO MASSACRE

On 16th August 1819, a huge crowd, variously estimated at 60,000 – 100,000 people, assembled in the centre of Manchester, essentially as part of a peaceful process to demand major parliamentary reforms – especially extended suffrage, and representation at Westminster, since, despite a population of over 2 million, Lancashire had no Members of Parliament at that time.

Two centuries ago, life for the vast majority of people – but especially those working in the newly-industrialised northern towns and cities – was verging on desperate, with widespread chronic poverty, famine, and mass unemployment. As a result of unbounded economic hardships in the wake of the hugely-expensive Napoleonic Wars, taxes had risen to crippling levels, and for many the introduction of the widely-despised Corn Laws in 1815 represented the last straw.

For years, discontent amongst the lowest classes of society had increasingly simmered, to the point where the Establishment had feared a revolution similar to that in France just 30 years earlier. Accordingly, any mass meetings – no matter how innocent or peaceful – were viewed with great fear and suspicion by local magistrates, acting as agents for the Home Office in London, and were frequently banned or rapidly dispersed by the use of local militia and regiments of mounted Yeomanry, the latter being *de facto* private armies.

The crowd in Manchester had gathered to hear renowned orator Henry Hunt, one of the country's leading campaigners for political reform, but whose movements were constantly monitored by the authorities, as he was deemed no more than a dangerous 'rabble-rouser'. Hunt and his fellow campaigners had distributed leaflets throughout all the towns and villages comprising what we know today as Greater Manchester, exhorting everyone to join the protest meeting, which was held in a large open space in the city centre, known as St. Peter's Field.

The downtrodden masses responded enthusiastically to the invitation, preparing flags and banners bearing their protest messages, and marching from all points of the compass to the centre of Manchester, many to the beat of drums. The resultant huge crowd, coupled with the drumming, cheering and flag-waving, panicked the authorities, and very promptly after Henry Hunt took the podium to address the crowd, the order was given to diverse military regiments (who were conveniently 'waiting in the wings') to disperse the crowd as rapidly as possible.

There were no caveats, and so large numbers of mounted soldiers and militia – many of whom were alcohol-fuelled – waded into the crowd, indiscriminately wielding their sabres. The results were disastrous, with 18 people killed, and hundreds wounded (either from sabre slashes or trampled underfoot by the rampaging horses), including many maimed for life.

After the carnage was over, an observer reported that the area resembled a battlefield, and as one of the most shameful events in British history took place just four years after the Battle of Waterloo, it was very soon labelled 'Peterloo'.

Now, the bi-centenary of that iconic happening in our nation's history, which was ultimately to lead to the desired widespread political reform, and gradually-increasing suffrage, is imminent, and is being commemorated in a diversity of ways throughout the region.

In 2018, Mike Leigh's acclaimed film *Peterloo* was released, with a cast including Westhoughton-born Maxine Peake who played the fictional character Nellie. In the wake of the film has come the publication of several new books on the subject, a plethora of lectures and dramatic/musical productions, and currently a number of high-profile exhibitions being staged in Manchester and surrounding districts. Bolton will have its own Peterloo exhibition, which will be staged at the Central Library from 3rd August to 10th November.

Whilst representatives from virtually every town, village and hamlet within marching distance of Manchester joined in the protest, members of Westhoughton Local History Group, having researched parochial aspects of the story, believe that Westhoughton can claim to be unique amongst all these Lancashire communities, since people from the town represented both extremes of the wide social spectrum of the period.

Representing the class of wealth, influence and power – and hence embodying the Establishment – were two men who were notorious scourges of the working class, with both of them having played prominent roles in the lives of the humble folk of Westhoughton some seven years earlier, when, as part of the frequent crushing of Luddite revolts, the famed *Burning of Westhoughton Mill* in 1812 had resulted in hangings and deportations.

The first of these was William Hulton (1787 – 1864), a member of the family dynasty which had owned large tracts of land in Lancashire since the late 12th century, ultimately establishing the family seat at Hulton Hall, surrounded by the extensive Hulton Park, on the eastern fringes of Westhoughton.

Hulton held many positions of high office, including, at the time of Peterloo, the chairmanship of the powerful Lancashire and Cheshire Magistrates. In this role it was he who gave the fateful order to the Yeomanry and Hussars to charge the Manchester crowd with such fateful results.

Secondly, Bolton-born Colonel Ralph Fletcher (1757 – 1832) was also a member of a local wealthy family which had generated much of its wealth from coal-mining in the district, ultimately including Atherton Collieries at Howe Bridge, adjacent to Westhoughton's southern boundary. Fletcher was a magistrate in Bolton and Manchester (under Hulton's direction), and was also in charge of Bolton Volunteer Yeomanry.

He had long demonstrated a loathing of the working classes, and relished any opportunity to quash any hint of uprising or rebellion. Put bluntly, he was a 'spymaster' in the pay of Whitehall, having established *The Society for Information and Correspondence*, which was essentially a network of local paid spies, most of whom were out of work men willing to betray their fellow sufferers for money. In this role, Fletcher was required to report almost daily to the Home Office on any so-called 'seditious activity'.

At the other extreme of the spectrum was a group of desperately-hungry and politically radical workers from the Wingates district of Westhoughton, mainly handloom weavers and agricultural labourers. They were willing recruits to the cause, and marched to Manchester and back on that ill-fated day, although there are no records of any Westhoughton casualties.

COMMEMORATING THE PETERLOO MASSACRE IN WESTHOUGHTON

Having established a fine reputation for commemorating key anniversaries of major historical events in the town (including *The Burning of Westhoughton Mill*, *The Pretoria Pit Disaster*, and *Westhoughton Under Siege* - the fight against the threatened massive Manchester/Salford overflow in the 1960s) the town's history group will be continuing that tradition on the occasion of the Peterloo bi-centenary.

Working with representatives of local amateur dramatic organisations, Westhoughton Local History Group is set to stage a reconstruction of the part which the town played in the Peterloo story, with a group of adults and children acting out a narrated story, to a background of projected images of the unfolding dramatic events.

This will take place before an invited audience at Westhoughton library on Thursday, 15th August, and will coincide with the opening of a complementary exhibition staged by the heritage organisation on the library's upper level, which will remain in-situ until the end of September.

In addition to the dramatic production and the exhibition, the group will also be publishing an extended illustrated essay summarising the Westhoughton dimension to the 1819 happenings.

Westhoughton Local History Group meets on the upper level of Westhoughton Library on the first and third Thursdays of each month, from 10am to 12 noon. For further general information on the Group's diverse activities, or the Peterloo project in particular, call 01204 696984.