

# The Huddersfield Daily Examiner

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## The Flag of Freedom

### A Skelmanthorpe Reminiscence

To the students of Yorkshire history an interesting relic of the Chartist movement has come to light in the shape of a flag which was woven by a man named Bird in the Barracks, now known as Ratcliffe street, Skelmanthorpe over a 100 years ago. This flag was first displayed at a Reform Meeting held on August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1819, at Almondbury Bank, where a great crowd had assembled, and to which "Skelmanthorpe, along with other places, sent a large contingent." At this meeting a Mr. Dickinson, of Dewsbury, acted as chairman, and a Huddersfield man, Mr. Robert Harrison, who was the speaker, denounced the people responsible for the Peterloo massacre in language so violent and inflammatory that the "Leeds Mercury" refused to publish it.

Evidently at that period this Chartist standard was considered a seditious emblem by the authorities, for the constable of Skelmanthorpe was deputed to arrest the custodian, but as the flag could not be found, no arrest was made, and for the next two years it was often buried and thus retained by the Chartists for future demonstrations.

Whether or not this emblem was publicly displayed during the ensuing ten years I have been unable to ascertain, but it was carried at a demonstration at Wakefield in 1832, and on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October 1838, it again led the Skelmanthorpe Chartists, this time to the "Dumb Steeple", then known as Peep Green, where, "though scarcely equal to the Lancashire meeting, it was nevertheless a noble gathering; the numbers were estimated at 250,000. As at Kersall Moor there was no lack of music, flags, and banners, to give spirit to the proceedings. Bands attended from Leeds, Bradford, Halifax, Huddersfield, Dewsbury, and all the towns within convenient distance of the place of meeting, and as one after another they marched upon the Green, the appearance of the various bodies, with all their paraphernalia, was most imposing." The meeting was addressed by Feargus O'Connor and "the cheers with which he was hailed as he mounted the hustings were tremendous; the air echoed with the ringing shouts of the mighty multitude, than which nothing could be more inspiring to the object on whom they were bestowed.

His colleagues were Mr. Lawrence Pitkeithly, a merchant of Huddersfield, and Mr. William Rider, a working man. The former was a man of benevolent turn of mind, somewhat of the Cobbett school of politics; a speaker whose earnestness, rather than his oratory, made him popular. About Rider there was nothing of the orator; he was plain in speech as in appearance; indeed he appeared to regard talking as child's play. Belonging to the extreme physical force school, he deemed all moral means of agitation, beyond what was necessary to marshal the democratic forces, as a mere waste of time."

One cannot mention O'Connor without calling to mind his two contemporaries, Ostler, the "Factory King", and Joseph Rayner Stephens Holyoake, in his "Life of Stephens," says "The three, O'Connor, Ostler, and Stephens, played into each other's hands, and had an almost inconceivable command over the public."

Some weeks before the Peep Green demonstration on the 25<sup>th</sup> August, Ostler left Fixby Hall, after serving as steward for Squire Thornhill from January 5<sup>th</sup> 1821 and "was escorted into Huddersfield with a long procession of friends, accompanied by bands of music and flags and banners; all along the route the road was lined with enthusiastic throng. . . . When the procession reached Huddersfield, a monster gathering of children (from all parts of the district) welcomed it with great glee and filled the air with their voices, singing the factory child's song, 'We will have the ten hour bill.'

"The streets were crowded, but people readily made way for the procession, which having stopped a few minutes now passed on amid tumultuous cheering. Every window was filled with spectators; and crowds were seated on the house tops. It was not merely Huddersfield that thus greeted the "Factory King." Great numbers were present from distant parts of the West Riding and many parts of Lancashire. A platform had been erected in Queen Street, where the immense multitude was addressed by Mr. Ostler and other speakers, and the proceedings terminated with the termination of an address to Mr. Ostler by the Huddersfield Short-time Committee. There was not the slightest disturbance though the numbers present were estimated at from 80,000 to 100,000 persons."

On October 25<sup>th</sup> Ostler was served a writ for debt at the suit of Thornhill, but it was not until December 9<sup>th</sup> 1840 that he was incarcerated in the Fleet Prison, and it was in Cell 12, and later Cell 5, Coffee Gallery, that he wrote his famous "Fleet Papers."

I notice, while glancing through the "Fleet Papers," that on November 12<sup>th</sup> 1842, Oastler was removed from the Fleet to the Queen's Prison despite his protests, and in an open letter to the Secretary of State, he condemns the then, Tory Government, as being responsible for "this unconstitutional affair." In describing his new abode he says "Having been compelled to leave Mrs. Oastler in the Fleet, to take care of our little stock of furniture and large assortment of papers. I could not have a bed, until some arrangement to receive my furniture here, but for the kindness of a 'chum.' I have been four nights wandering about and sitting in my armchair. I should have been six nights without a bed, if my 'chum' had not kindly given up his bed at the Coffee House to accommodate me. It is rather annoying to be put to such shifts, but it is nothing to the pangs I feel when I know that my dear wife is. . . . I dare not trust myself on this point."

"I soon received a ticket a ticket for a room with a 'chum.' No.2 in 10 (staircase), is now my dwelling place. The room is very small, but pleasant it is the best in the prison; but it swarmed with bugs. It is impossible that I can convey to you, sir, the suffering of my first two nights in this place. Such filthy vermin has been, since I left home, my constant dread. I have been preserved from them until now. The expenses of removing and cleansing (I hope the bugs are all destroyed) will be some pounds, which adds to the sum of which I am defrauded by the Conservative Government."

Even while he was suffering intense agony both of body and mind he was concerned more for the welfare of his fellow prisoners than his own. On December 24<sup>th</sup> he wrote:- "I would without a murmur endure the wrongs you are heaping on me. I might silently witness those to which my imprisoned comrades are subjected, were I not aware that this is only an experiment, which, if yielded to without protest, will pave the way to that general overthrow of order, and of right which must be the ultimate result of the successful progress of that system, of expediency of which this is only the beginning."

Returning again to the Chartist flag, we find it taking a conspicuous in two rejoicings, at the conclusion of the Crimean War in 1856, and again at the end of the American Civil War ten years later.

Once more this emblem of political freedom made its appearance when on October 11<sup>th</sup> 1884, it led the Skelmanthorpe reformers to a monster demonstration in St. George's Square, Huddersfield, where it was estimated 40,000 people were present. Simultaneous meetings were being held throughout the country to protest against the action of the House of Lords in refusing to sanction the extension of the county franchise. The Huddersfield parade assembled in South Parade, East Parade, Manchester Road, and Chapel hill from there marched along Buxton Road to St. George's Square, where numerous platforms had been built to accommodate the speakers, amongst whom were Mr. E. A. Leatham, Mr. W.H. Leatham, and Mr. Bradlaugh.

The leading article in the "Huddersfield Examiner," October 18<sup>th</sup> 1884, said:- "Chatsworth, Bradford, Salford, Rochdale, Great Harwood, Mid-Cheshire and other places not now to be enumerated, saw thousands of determined men. Old reformers of 1832, young Reformers whom the agitation of 1884 has roused to the first pains and pleasures of political consciousness and men of all ages between met with one common purpose. . . . Of the Huddersfield demonstration, even the enemy is constrained to admit that it was in point of numbers a magnificent 'success'. . . . St. George's Square held an assemblage so vast that Leeds itself would have reason to be proud of it and Huddersfield has grounds for legitimate pride in public spirit, the intelligence, and enthusiastic determination of her people."

In the evening meetings were held in the Town Hall and the old armoury. The speakers advertised included Sir W. Lawson, who, however was unable to attend, Herbert J. Gladstone, E.A. Leatham, and Mr. Bradlaugh; but we learn that "the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway Company conspired with the fates to increase the disappointment by throwing Mr. Gladstone forty minutes late."

Mr. Gladstone, says the "Examiner," "will carry with him the conviction that the weight of the great towns of the North will be thrown into the Government scale with greater and greater willingness according as the attitude displayed by the Ministry is firm and unyielding. . . . Mr. Leatham has seldom been more 'happy' than he was in his address at the Town Hall, an address at once able, forceful, and brilliant, and Mr. Bradlaugh, with a moderation which many can scarcely bring themselves to credit, and a fire and force which compel attention and arouse the enthusiasm of his auditors, was very effective."

It is interesting to note that, despite its old age, this flag is in good condition, and is highly valued by its present owner.

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(Contributed by Archibald F. Key, Huddersfield.)

Source:

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