

**The Trowbridge Chartists: demagogues, the demotic and the semiotics of
solidarity. A local study of Chartist dissent in and around the
'Manchester of the West' (1838-1842)**

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Abstract

The dissertation examines the evolution of the Chartist movement in the Wiltshire town of Trowbridge, beginning with its emergence in 1838 and concluding with its decline after the failure of the second petition in 1842. Relying principally on contemporary press reports from publications local and national, sympathetic and antipathetic, it traces the evolution of the movement through two distinct phases, punctuated by the trauma of the Devizes riot and its aftermath of judicial interventions in the autumn of 1839 and the Spring of 1840.

Trowbridge itself is considered in its context as an improbably parochial crucible for Chartist agitation on a scale unprecedented in its history. The causes - the volatilities of its sudden growth, its rapidly shifting demographic and the dramatic turbulences affecting its primary industry of cloth manufacture - are evidenced from a variety of sources and speak of a dynamic far removed contemporary tropes of a rural county town.

The temporal axis upon which the study revolves, permits a detailed consideration the evolution of the local movement. Against the grain of some of its historiography, this proposes that, in many aspects of their organisation, the Trowbridge Chartists continued to consolidate their position after the defeats of Devizes and the courts. The shift, from the insurrectional Jacobinism of peripatetic mass processions and rallies into a more measured, if no less passionate, campaign against local injustices, articulated from the security of their own premises at the Democratic Chapel, is significant. As well as intimating the ascendancy of 'moral' over 'physical' force, it reveals much about the evolution of the language – and metalanguage – of Chartism that left, as is confirmed by much of its historiography, a heritage of political empowerment to its beneficiaries.

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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work and that I have not submitted it, or any part of it, for a degree at The Open University, or any other university or institution. Parts of this dissertation are built on work I submitted for assessment at part of A825.

1. Introduction

In the autumn of 1838 there began, in and around the town of Trowbridge, a sustained period of social and political unrest, unprecedented in scale and intensity. The explosion of Chartism across a region already accustomed to outbursts of civil disorder, unsettled the local authorities and, for a time, appeared to threaten the parliamentary system which it sought to reform.¹

There are two key features of this period which have determined the direction of the study. Firstly, its narrative arc is manageable within the context of the rubric, making it possible to trace a coherent Chartist strategy as it evolves over the relatively short time frame of five years. Underpinning this chronological account is a second accompanying meta-narrative. This not only appears to qualify the blunt conclusion of the movement's failure in 1848 but also to contradict the assertion that Chartism in Trowbridge was terminally wounded in the aftermath of the Devizes riot of Easter, 1839. For, in the formative processes by which the Trowbridge Chartists attempted to repair their campaign, new modes of organisation and expression were explored and, as a consequence, new 'political' identities were forged by men – and women – often from lowly economic and social backgrounds within the town.

The history of the Trowbridge Chartists is often revealed in original voices whose eloquence and self-assurance belie their humble status. New literacies were synthesised

¹ See R.B. Pugh 'Chartism in Wiltshire and Somerset' in *Chartist Studies* ed. Asa Briggs (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1977) p.177

from older cultural forms, local in flavour, radical in tone and biblical in their persuasive polemic. From these formative voices, as the historiography appears to confirm, the makings of a new class, capable of articulating its own agenda in a register matched to parliamentary protocols, can be seen to take shape.² If Chartism in Trowbridge arrived as a flood, disruptive and damaging, it left in its wake a rich cultural sediment in which new political identities could be cultivated.

The attempt to follow this arc from its origins in the autumn of 1838 to its decline in 1843 – the trajectory of the study – does falter in its attempt to plot its vanishing point. Perhaps this is inevitable. By 1842, the fault lines in its own organisation and the idiosyncrasies of its national leadership had taken a toll on local Chartists as they struggled to synthesise strategies to improve conditions for those they represented in the town.³ Gradually the fervour of the first heady days had fallen away. Newspaper reports of local activities are more difficult to find. The drama and dialogue quietens. A silence descends.

But that sense of dying fall is compensated for in the drama and the intellectual growth of the local movement as it wrestles, between the years of 1840 -1842, to refine its campaign, against a constant pressure of resistances. It is the attempted synthesis of these contradictions, these buffetings, by the steady minds and steadfast hearts of at least some of the Trowbridge Chartists that is at the heart of this study. In their deliberations, they often appear to transcend individual vanities as they reach towards

²See Emma Griffin 'The Making of the Chartists; Popular Politics and Working-Class Autobiography in Early Victorian Britain' *English Historical review* Vol. CXXIX no.538 (May 2014)

³ See 'Trowbridge – Distress in the Manufacturing Districts' *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette* Jan 13, 1842 <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed Feb 6, 2022]

an articulation of policy that chimes – sometimes with startling familiarity – with a historiography laid down a century later.⁴

From these observations emerges a hypothesis – perhaps more an assertion – which underpins the study: - ‘that the Trowbridge Chartists, in their campaign to improve the appalling social and economic anomalies within their constituency, also created a complex social, linguistic and organisational scaffolding upon which the disenfranchised could construct a political identity, deserving of – and eventually achieving – parliamentary representation.’

A methodology that relies primarily on revealing the actual campaigning voices of the Trowbridge Chartists in order to record the arc of their history over four years, will also consider the transformative nature of their organisation; their networks, literacies, meetings and correspondence. For it was in these, perhaps, rather than the failure of the Charter itself, that their legacy can be found.

Specific questions which have helped to direct and inform the research include the following: -

- What was the particular character of the town of Trowbridge at the time – its demographic and its social character – that made it so receptive to the Chartist movement?

⁴ See G. Stedman Jones, ‘Rethinking Chartism’ in *Languages of Class* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996) pp.90-178

- How did Chartism embed itself in the town and why were the first manifestations of its campaign so successful?
- What resistances did it meet and how did local Chartists respond to the draconian measures taken by the government to control and repress the movement between 1839/40?
- How did the local organisation evolve between 1841 and 1842 and in what ways did it refine the platform that would eventually empower its followers in their struggle for recognition and representation?

There is a wealth of literature, beyond the scope of this study to paraphrase or to precis, which illuminates both the Chartist ideal and its many manifestations in the struggle to extend the franchise. ASA Briggs' emphasis on the significance of the local, chimes within the context of a study based, principally, on one Wiltshire town.⁵ The work of R.B. Pugh has helped to sharpen the focus on those geographic and demographic aspects of the town and its satellite villages, favourable to the growth of the movement.⁶ E.P. Thompson's seminal account of changing patterns of work and status amongst weavers - who made up much of the Trowbridge Chartist following - underpins many of the preoccupations with class that exercised the local and national movement.⁷

⁵ See Asa Briggs, 'The Local Background of Chartism' *Chartist Studies* ed. Asa Briggs (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1977) pp.4-5

⁶ Pugh, p.177

⁷ E.P. Thompson, 'The Weavers' in *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, Penguin Books Ltd., 1970) p.297

Gareth Stedman Jones' fascinating work on language has coloured the evaluation of local Chartist publications and correspondence, as well as encouraging a focus on the semiotics of a movement in which the theatricality of marches, torchlit processions and meetings played such an important part.⁸ Emma Griffin's research on working class autobiography and Anna Clark's work on gender have helped to contextualise the local voices of those standing in the shadows of its demagogues.⁹ Local studies have provided a finer focus on the town and its demography. 'The Trowbridge Chartists' by Michael Lansdown and Ken Roger's detailed studies of the history of the town have provided valuable local perspectives.¹⁰

The study's primary sources lean heavily on contemporary press accounts of key events as they occurred over the period. Issues of accuracy are occasionally problematic, although disputed accounts can sometimes become an important part of the narrative, as was the case in the reporting of the Bath Sturgeists, in March 1842.¹¹ However, since much of their evidence consists of reported speech or correspondence, wilder, partisan editorialising can, to an extent, be disregarded. Nevertheless, in juxtaposing accounts from publications with different editorial perspectives, it has been possible, on occasions, to access the real, visceral tensions dividing the community at this time.

Henry Vincent's 'Western Vindicator' is an extraordinary newspaper, in which Chartism finds a powerful, popular, local voice.¹² Other local publications, generally sympathetic

⁸ Stedman Jones, p.90

⁹ Griffin, 'The Making of the Chartists'

Anna Clark, 'The Rhetoric of Chartist Domesticity: Gender, Language and Class in the 1830s and 1840s', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol 31, No. 1 (Jan 1992) pp. 62-68

¹⁰ Michael Lansdown, *The Trowbridge Chartists* (Trowbridge, West Wilts Historical Association, 1997)

Ken Rogers, *The Book of Trowbridge* (Birmingham, Barracuda Books Ltd., 1984)

¹¹ 'New alliance...' *Northern Star* March 9, 1842

<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed March 20, 2023]

¹² *Western Vindicator* <<https://www.peoplescollection.wales>> [accessed November 26, 2022]

to those seeking to modify the franchise, such as the ‘Wiltshire Independent’ have also been referenced. So, too, have those implacably opposed to the movement, like the ‘Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette’, a deeply conservative paper, representing an adjacent, unreconstructedly rural – Tory – readership.¹³ Behind all of these, the thundering of the ‘Northern Star’, constantly attempts to co-ordinate, if not always to reconcile the robust individualities of the regions.

Personal letters, beyond the correspondence pages of these newspapers, have proved more elusive, although there is an intense series of communications between local magistrates in Trowbridge with their political masters in Whitehall, seeking advice and support in dealing with the increasingly volatile situation in and around the town. Digitally archived in Home Office records in the National Archive, these have proved invaluable in identifying very palpable local fears of the movement’s insurrectionary character as well as the more laconic official responses from the comfortably distant Sir John Russell, especially during and after the incandescent Spring of 1839.¹⁴

The study consists of three chapters. Chapter One considers some aspects of the history of town at the time of the Chartist campaign. Its relatively stable development as a centre of the West of England cloth trade is clearly disrupted by massive growth in the 1820s exacerbated by dramatic volatilities in the industry after the French wars. Chapter Two examines the first, exultant wave of Chartism as it overwhelms the town, and

¹³ The Wiltshire Independent <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed December 2, 2022]

The Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed December 2, 2022]

¹⁴ Home Office: Disturbances Correspondence HO 40/47/132 <<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9720567>> [accessed December 19, 2022]

considers some of the reasons for its success. It concludes with the disastrous humiliation of the Trowbridge Chartists at Devizes and with it, the retrenchment into 1840. Chapter Three considers the fall-out from the trials of the Trowbridge leadership in the context of evolving Chartist policy. It looks in more detail at the eloquent contributions of Trowbridge Chartists to national debates, as well as some of their increasingly pressing parochial concerns.

The conclusion attempts to draw together the findings in a summative account of Chartist achievements during the period, including those which transcended the local movement's organisational decline in 1843.

1: Why Trowbridge?

Today, Trowbridge seems an incongruously bland location for the dramatic confrontations which shook the town to its very foundations in the Spring and Summer of 1839. That conflict was fuelled by a combination of factors, with origins in the tectonic shifts in population, working practices and economies that accompanied the town's industrialisation in the first decades of the nineteenth century.¹ These, in their turn, had been exacerbated by a national crisis in confidence over the failings of the recently reformed parliament to mitigate the economic shocks that unsettled the cloth industry, among others, in the aftermath of the French wars.² A principal cohort represented by the Trowbridge Chartists consisted of those marginalised by new working practices in their industry, and by extension, the helplessness – neglect? - of their parliamentary representatives in addressing their grievances.³

The town had relied upon the manufacture of woollen cloth as a staple industry for centuries, with the earliest of its water powered mills dating from 1372.⁴ But it was in the mid eighteenth century that the ‘opulence’, which was seen by the Chartists as the principal benefit of political power, reached spectacular proportions.⁵ A list of trades and occupations catering for the rich, from 1751 is telling: 'barbers/peruque makers, jewellers, mantua-makers, stay-makers, gunsmiths, clockmakers, attorneys, medical men, bankers, etc.'⁶

¹ See 'Commercial and Industrial History -Trowbridge' *British History Online* <<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/wilts/vol7/pp.125-171>> [accessed June 20, 2023]

² See E.P. Thompson, 'The Weavers' in *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, Penguin Books Ltd., 1970) p.297

³ See Kenneth H. Rogers, 'Hard Times' in *Warp and Weft* (Buckingham, Barracuda Books Ltd., 1986) pp.99-108

⁴ See Rogers, p.18

⁵ See G. Stedman Jones, 'Rethinking Chartism' in *Languages of Class* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996) p.100

⁶ Kenneth H. Rogers, *The Book of Trowbridge* (Buckingham, Barracuda Books Ltd., 1984) p.68

The wealth of these clothiers, in spite of the eye-watering showiness of those 'palaces' they built for themselves, first in the town centre and afterwards in the more salubrious suburbs, seems, in the context of the later Chartist insurrections, not to have been dangerously provocative. For, until 1800, when the first large scale factory was built at Staverton, the industry had remained decentralised; the cloth produced in domestic surroundings with mills used only for fulling, with water power driving the heavy stocks.⁷ The bucolic idyll of handloom weavers measuring out their days between their warp and weft, their cottage gardens and the warm companionship of their peers may have never been more than dreamy myth, although E.P.Thompson's essay intimates that, in comparison of what was to follow, this narrative carried some weight.⁸

Throughout much of the 18th century, Trowbridge appears to have prospered from the buoyancy of its wool trade, with the town moving confidently towards a recognisably civic society. Charity schools had been established in the early 1700s under the patronage of wealthy benefactors.⁹ In 1732 a workhouse was built at Gooseacre and by 1736, had a complement of 40 paupers. By 1742, it had been demolished, replaced by an alms house, outdoor relief and what appears to have been a benevolent patrimony towards the poor that would have been unrecognisable to the Chartists of the 1840s. James Bodman writing in 1814, observed that, 'as to relieving the poor, no parish has its equal'.¹⁰

Things were to change dramatically in Trowbridge in the second decade of the new century. The town's population suddenly exploded, primarily as a consequence of the

⁷ See Rogers, p.93

⁸ See Thompson, p.298

⁹ See Rogers, p. 73

¹⁰ James Bodman, *A Concise History of Trowbridge* (Bristol, Philip Rose, 20, Broadmead, 1812) p.34

opportunities afforded by work in the mills. From 5799 in 1801 it leapt to 9545 in 1821. By 1831, it was 10,863.¹¹ The first purpose-built steam driven factory was built in 1808 and by 1820, there were a dozen, liberated from the river in their spread across the town. George Haden, engine-erector from Boulton and Watt, arrived in the town in 1814. 'I scarcely ever saw such a place for business', he wrote, '... there is not a house to let of any description.'¹²

By 1832, however, there had been an extraordinary decline. An apocalyptic account of the privations endured by the many in Trowbridge for whom the bubble had burst, appeared in a report in 'The Ballot'. Wages had dropped from 30s per week to 10s for those lucky enough to be employed but, 'there are at this time between four and five thousand people on the parish books in Trowbridge... the average allowance to old, unemployed or sick paupers is from 1s to 2s.6d. per week... Hundreds... take their scanty pittance, and wander over the country, shirtless and barefoot, in the character of beggars.' There is more. As an afterthought, the correspondent writes of children working in the factories – 'in ceaseless drudgery, in respiring the mephitic airs of these prison houses... from 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning to 8 in the evening...(with 2 hours remission).'¹³

So serious had the situation become for the handloom weavers - who still made up a large proportion of the Trowbridge workforce – that the government commissioned a vast and extraordinarily detailed report on the state of the industry across the country.

Anthony Austin, the assistant commissioner who visited Trowbridge in 1838, included

¹¹ Rogers, p.94

¹² Rogers, p.94

¹³ 'Suffering of the Humbler Classes in Western Districts' *The Ballot* April 15, 1832 <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed November 15, 2023]

in his report a statement signed by 21 Trowbridge weavers. Their eloquent explanation of the dire straits into which their trade had veered, goes some way to explain the enthusiasm with which Chartism would be received into the town. They begin with the stark fact that, of the 1623 looms listed in Trowbridge and its satellite parishes, 928 are 'in work' and 695 are 'out of work'. They list lack of protections – deregulation, allowing all and sundry – including unsupervised children – to set up in competition, without the need for any kind of apprenticeship. They understand the imperatives of the market: - 'the market for labourers (is) more productive than the market for labour'. They calculate the cost of their collective losses, which are, inevitably, huge, and end on a poignant note. Comparing themselves with outdoor labourers, they wish them well – and better paid. But they assert that those outdoors have many privileges: 'less rent', 'gardens', 'not confined within doors', 'not so many hours in the day'; 'they have not a thousandth part so much on their minds, but can go to their labour whistling and singing all the day, if they are in a merry mood.'¹⁴

Their wistful sentimentality, considered in the context of the 'Swing' riots of less than a decade before, may be considered crass.¹⁵ It does, however, go some way to explain their passionate desire for parliamentary reform, and with it their own, enfranchised voice in the proceedings.

¹⁴ 'Report from Anthony Austin Esq., on the South Western Parts of England' *Royal Commission on Handloom Weavers (reports of commissioners) 1840* p.456/Image248

<<https://parlipapers-proquest-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk>> [accessed January 5, 2023]

¹⁵ See Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé *Captain Swing* (London: Phoenix Press, 2001)

2 Mixed Messages: Solidarity and Dissonance 1838-1840

In ‘An Address to the Irish People’, published in November, 1838, and signed by William Lovett, founder of the London Working Men’s Association, as well as twenty or so representatives from around the country, including W. Rose of Trowbridge, several assertions were made: -

‘We have not, neither do we desire leaders; as we believe the principles we advocate have been retarded, injured or betrayed by leadership.’

‘Regarding the other assertion that we have talked of ‘physical force’... we are not going to deny that we have been altogether guiltless of impropriety of language, for when the eye dwells upon extreme poverty, trampled upon by severe oppression, the heart often forces a language from the tongue which sober reflection would redeem, and judgement condemn.’

‘We are as desirous as the most scrupulous Conservative of protecting all that is good, wise and just in our institutions and to hold as sacred and secure the domain of the rich and the cottage of the poor.’¹

The actions and behaviour of the Trowbridge Chartists, whose organised presence in the town is first recorded in the summer of 1838, were not entirely consistent with such pious objectives. Indeed, there is little congruence, either in evidence from primary sources in the local press, or from its general historiography, between the movement’s thoughtful, centralised articulations of policy and the wild exhortations of its local leadership, intoxicated by the passion of its supporters at public meetings. What is clear from both, is the gathering momentum of the campaign in its breathless, hectic first year in the town. Events moved so quickly that it seems hardly surprising that the earnest guidance of the national leadership might be lost in the drama of the heady marches and hustings of Timbrell Street and the Marketplace.²

¹ ‘Address from the Reformers of England, Scotland and Wales to the Irish People’ *The Sun*, November 3, 1838, <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed August 27, 2023]

² ‘Popular Demonstration’ *The London Dispatch*, July 29, 1838 <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed July 6, 2023]

R.B. Pugh sees the germination of the movement in Trowbridge as having originated in Bath, which he describes as a city in decline from its extraordinary Regency excess, from which a new wave of ‘radical gentry’ began to disseminate a new agenda. He describes Trowbridge and its adjoining wool towns, ‘whose economy was being dislocated by technological changes in the manufacture of cloth’ as ‘good ground’ (in which) Chartism could easily take root’.³ He also asserts the following: - ‘Without Bath, the Chartists of Wiltshire would have been poorly led; without Wiltshire, the Chartists of Bath would have lacked the exhilaration of the mission field’.⁴ Whether the leadership of ‘Bath’ was as helpful to Trowbridge as Pugh asserts, especially in those early months of the campaign, is, perhaps, open to question.

But if there are dissonances between aspiration and execution amongst the Chartists, there are others, equally dramatic, in the fabric of the town’s society, already touched upon in the previous chapter. W.H Tucker, a local diarist of liberal inclinations, recorded an account of Trowbridge life during these turbulent years, which might not, for the most part, have seemed out of place in a novel by Jane Austen; delightful excursions in the local countryside, in the company of comfortable male companions and their ladies, make up much of the content. However, he had a finger on the pulse of political life as well. He noted the notorious election of Francis Burdett, former radical, turned Tory, in the election of August, 1837: ‘August 8: the disgrace of North Wilts sealed; final state of the poll: Burdett 2365, Long 2197, Methuen, 1876’. His entry for August 9 reads: ‘Went to Hinton with Dad. Found Farmer Manley had been compelled to vote for Burdett by his landlord. By this abominable conduct the election was gained.’⁵

Such an observation might have suggested an empathy with at least some of the principles of the Charter, as they were promoted in the town a year later. But Tucker’s middle-class perspectives speak loudly of the difficulties that faced the Chartists in their initial attempts to cross that cultural divide. In September 1838, he attended a Sunday service at Semington Workhouse: ‘We encountered a number of ‘old familiar faces’. Little Jacky Sly of drunken notoriety officiated as clerk and sung with amazing

³ R.B. Pugh ‘Chartism in Wiltshire and Somerset’ in *Chartist Studies* ed. Asa Briggs (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1977) p.174

⁴ Pugh, p.174

⁵ W.H.Tucker, ‘*The Diary of William Henry Tucker 1825-1850*’ ed. Helen Rogers (Chippenham:Wiltshire Record Society, 2009) p.55

earnestness... Altogether, the scene would have presented a rich harvest for Cruickshank'.⁶ If he was shocked by the brutal conditions obtaining in local workhouses since the introduction of the New Poor Law in 1834, he expressed none of the outrage that exercised the Chartists. William Carrier, one of its illustrious local leaders was alleged, at his trial, to have said: 'a poor young man got married, and in two to three months was out of employ; he applied for relief and was sent to the workhouse; his wife was placed in one dark dungeon and he in another, never to see each other again.'⁷

When the Chartists did cross his path, Tucker's comments seem brusque and desultory: 'March 30, 1839: The Chartists are grown very rebellious and noisy. This evening, to add to the pleasure of Easter, Miss Clift, the east wind and a deluge of rain arrived together.'⁸ In May, 1840, a walk to Farleigh and Iford was spoiled by 'the scum of Trowbridge, drinking and swearing.'⁹ Some in their number might well have included those who had been swayed by the proposed Chartist reforms of 1838/39, initially intended to embrace the politics of Tucker and his liberal acquaintances in the town.

That election of Francis Burdett revealed further fault lines that would confront the Chartists as they made their first attempts to gain some purchase amongst the enfranchised classes. At a celebratory dinner for the successful candidate, the Reverend Francis Fulford of Trowbridge was disarmingly frank in his analysis of the current political situation: - 'The day had arrived when the distinction of Tories and Whigs was at an end; they might be rightly denominated Conservatives. Consequently, there were but two parties, the Conservatives and the Destructors and ... he was opposed to the Destructive parties... who would hurl the hereditary lords and bishops from the House of Peers and would have universal suffrage and vote by ballot.'¹⁰ It was clear that old authority, embedded amongst local landowners as well as the Clothiers of Trowbridge and its established church, was not likely to surrender easily to new expectations raised, but by no means realised by the recent Reform Act.

⁶ Tucker, p.66

⁷ 'The Chartist Trials' *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, March 12, 1840
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed April 3, 2023]

⁸ Tucker, p.70

⁹ Tucker, p.85

¹⁰ 'Dinner to Sir F. Burdett' *The Wiltshire Independent* September 21, 1837
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed Nov 10, 2022]

Onto this volatile local stage, in the summer of 1838, stepped the Chartists, when in June, the first Trowbridge meeting was addressed by Carrier, Vincent and Roberts. This triumvirate, who were to appear again together on local platforms on many occasions over the next year, personified the extraordinary diversity of Chartism's cultural roots even within a local context. William Carrier, whose notorious ability to excite a crowd is well documented, was a fiery demagogue from the town itself, referred to at his later trial as 'a gig-man and a hatter'.¹¹ Henry Vincent, a printer from London, moved to Bath in 1838 and immediately established himself as a leading light, not only as an accomplished orator on local hustings, but also as the editor of the unstamped 'Western Vindicator', a Chartist publication that first appeared in Bath and Bristol and their satellite towns in early 1839.¹² W.P. Roberts - 'the People's Attorney General' - was a radical lawyer whose embrace of Chartism extended, for almost a decade, from the initial meetings of the London Working Men's Association, until its decline amidst the murky confusions of O'Connor's land deal in 1845.¹³

An account of that first meeting in Trowbridge, in the 'London Dispatch' of June 17, reveals the remarkable anticipation of, and response to, the speakers and their exhortations: 'On Tuesday morning last, a little before twelve o'clock it was announced that a public meeting of the working classes of Trowbridge would be held in the marketplace, at six in the evening; long before which a numerous multitude had assembled...' Carrier spoke of 'the traitorous conduct of the present government;' Vincent compared 'the present state of this country to France just previous to the revolution', followed by an 'accurate description of the overbearing tyranny of the Tories and the shuffling thimble-rigging of the Whigs.' The 'multitude' was unequivocal in its support. 'The enthusiastic cheering and riveted attention of the great multitude during the whole speech, which lasted nearly an hour, was enough to convince the most sceptical that a great and beneficial change was taking place in the public mind.'¹⁴

¹¹ 'Crown brief: Queen v Carrier trial' *HO 40-48* National Archives p.590
<<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C3083350>> [accessed June 7, 2023]

¹² Pugh, p.175

¹³ Pugh, p.176

¹⁴ 'Radical Demonstration in Favour of the People's Charter' *London Dispatch*, June 17, 1838
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed December 5, 2022]

Pugh tells us that at another huge meeting on September 17, in Bath, to consider the adoption of the Charter, ‘the speakers were a mixture of Chartists and middle-class radicals’. Colonel – later Sir William Napier – ‘commended annual parliaments, universal suffrage, and the ballot, provided that they could be achieved without violence.’¹⁵ ‘Without violence.’ Already, the fault line between those advocating moral force and those moving towards physical resistance, was becoming apparent.

This fault line, ragged and erratic, continued to characterise – and to undermine – the Chartist campaign in Trowbridge throughout the next few years. It is at the heart of much of the historiography of the Chartist movement, both local and national, and is predicated on the uneasy relationship between its middle-class sympathisers, attempting to steer the movement in the direction of reform, and those from its more volatile, Jacobin cohort, representing artisans and labourers displaced and unsettled by rapid changes in the major local economy of the cloth trade. Asa Briggs refines this demarcation by referring to ‘three main groups within the heterogeneous labour force: - superior craftsmen... factory operatives... and domestic outworkers.’ He goes on to remark that ‘a main theme in Chartist history was the attempt to create a sense of class unity which would bind together these three groups...’, an attempt which he points out, ‘was never completely successful.’¹⁶ E.P. Thompson is rather more candid. Referring to Francis Place’s perspective of working-class reformers as ‘accessories’, he explains: - ‘Working men could not hope to bring about reform by and for themselves, but should give support to others ‘most likely’ to win concessions.’¹⁷

A local branch of the Working Men’s Association had been established in Trowbridge in April 1838 and by November, had a membership of over 550.¹⁸ It is difficult, to establish precisely the character of the movement in these early heady days in Trowbridge. Self-improvement, mutual support, moderation and temperance seem to have been powerful drivers within the WMA; This was an exhortation from April, 1838: - ‘The time is now arrived when we are determined to elevate ourselves from our

¹⁵ Pugh, p.176

¹⁶ Asa Briggs ‘The Local Background of Chartism’ in *Chartist Studies* ed. Asa Briggs (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1977) p.4

¹⁷ E.P.Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, Penguin Books Ltd., 1970) p.152

¹⁸ ‘To the Working Classes of Trowbridge’, *True Sun* April 22, 1838

<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed May 13, 2023]

present abject condition by... uniting to instruct each other, morally, socially and politically.’¹⁹ Weeks later, however, Carrier, Vincent and Roberts would be ramping up a rhetoric to inspire - and then incite - their followers.

On November 19, 1838, a remarkably short time after the first appearance of the Chartists in Trowbridge, a meeting was held that clearly alarmed the local magistrates, Clark and Stancombe – both wealthy clothiers – and which led to sustained correspondence with Sir John Russell, Secretary of State at the Home Department. Having obtained a copy of a handbill advertising the meeting, they wrote to Russell, even before it took place: - ‘the unusually late hour at which this meeting is fixed, (7.30pm) being to be conducted by torchlight, we are apprehensive may give rise to disturbance.’²⁰

On November 24, they write again, their apprehensions having been amply justified: ‘There were many thousands assembled on this occasion who marched through the marketplace with the usual banners displayed at such meetings with lighted torches and firing of pistols and guns and it would have been impossible for any carriage with horses to have passed for upwards of two hours.’²¹

Included in this correspondence is a sworn statement by one, John Foley, made on November 23, in front of the local magistrates. In it, he attempts to record fragments of speeches by Carrier, Roberts and Vincent. In spite of his occasional Dogberry confusions, the statement is a chilling reminder of just how far the Trowbridge leadership seemed to be leaning towards the Jacobin ‘sans culottism’ so alien to its middle-class supporters: -

‘Carrier: - I defy that detestable magisterial donkey. I defy him and his troop of Dragoon Guards. They dare not fight... Let every man swear before he goes to bed tonight, swear by the altar of his country, that he is willing to shed his blood in the

¹⁹ ‘Dinner to the Dorchester Labourers’ *The Weekly True Sun* April 2, 1838
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed December 5, 2022]

²⁰ ‘Wiltshire Disturbances’ *HO 40-40-1. Wilts-Wales*. National Archives
<<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/browse/r/r/C3083342>> [accessed Dec 15, 2022] p.55

²¹ *HO 40-40-1* p.61

cause...’ This is followed by Foley’s personal interjection – an indicator of his veracity, surely? – that ‘this last sentence I can’t swear was connected with the foregoing one.’

Roberts speaks next: - ‘They (his audience) had the power to cut off fifty crowned heads... there was a more determined moral courage in the people now that there was at the revolution of Charles I...’

And finally, Vincent: - ‘The trumpet shall flourish, and the bonfires shall be lighted on the tops of the hills. He said that he expected that when the delegates met at their meeting in London... the Government would arrest them, and they should be strung (or hung)! – up before Newgate but that he cared not if they only hung him up high enough to see the bonfires on the hills.’²²

The speeches are quoted at length because they are so revealing about the growing militancy of the movement during these early months in Trowbridge. Clearly, any lingering concerns about the sensibilities of local middle-class sympathisers were easily abandoned. Strikingly absent from these speeches, is any sense of policy, any sense, beyond the Charter itself, of how the movement might begin to address the demands of those thousands who stood listening with their expectations and their torches and their weapons.

Clearly, however, these meetings succeeded in establishing the Chartists as a potent force in the town, although from the evidence of Clark and Stancombe, it was obvious that much of the population was intimidated by their rhetoric and their shows of strength. That deliberate choice of the torchlit parade from their base – ironically at the old barracks on Bradley Road - along the two-mile route through the centre of town to Timbrell Street, has something medieval about it and, in its signifiers of banners and pikes, its fiery torches and shrill polemic, looks forward to sinister reincarnations across Europe in the twentieth century.

But, in spite of the fact that such meetings continued to challenge the local authority well into the Spring of 1839, evidence of ‘soft power’ and with it, a genuinely

²² HO 40-40-1 p.67

reforming ideal, is evident in many of the accounts of Chartist activity during this period. To find more measured voices, at least in the first iterations of the paper, Vincent's own 'Western Vindicator', first published on Feb 29, 1839, provides manifold evidence. In its first editorial, its stated objective is 'to instruct and amuse'. Moral probity, so palpably missing from the editorials of the stamped press with its 'party bigotry and class intolerance', its 'pander(ing) to the vices of the wealthy and privileged classes' will be its watchword: - 'He who undertakes the task of instruction should be a moral man, an enlightened man, possessing an inflexible love of truth and liberty.'²³

Here, focus on 'The People's Charter' is measured and optimistic; it offers a political solution to a political crisis 'so that the general mind may be directed to that social happiness that would be the goal of our highest hopes under an efficient system of representation.'²⁴ It is interesting to note that it is 'the general mind' which is being directed; not the 'working classes' or 'the handloom weavers'. There is a touching utopianism at work here where aspirations for the general social good are being invoked over and above the interests of particular classes within the movement.

If 'The Western Vindicator' could be seen to represent the Chartists of Trowbridge at this time – and its seminal contributions by Vincent, Roberts and Bartlett confirm the local connection, then it often revealed them to be more than fiery Jacobin orators, eager to tear down the edifices of the state. 'Publicola' – probably Bartlett himself - a regular correspondent and contributor, was a master of measured, even conciliatory argument: 'Many electors who are in good circumstances as tradesmen would rather be without suffrage; for how often are they compelled to vote against their own consciences to please their heartless Tory customers'. But he continues, 'self-preservation is the first law of animated nature and therefore we should not condemn the man but the system which causes this immorality.'²⁵

²³ 'Politics for the People' *Western Vindicator* February 23, 1839 <<https://www.peoplescollection.wales>> [accessed November 26, 2022]

²⁴ *W.V.* February 23, 1839

²⁵ 'Politics for the People' *Western Vindicator* March 2, 1839 <<https://www.peoplescollection.wales>> [accessed November 26, 2022]

In the same edition, the editorial claims its aims ‘shall be to make these pages the means of awakening a new spirit of determined patriotism in the breasts of all classes of society.’²⁶

‘A Tradesman’s Daughter’ from the neighbouring town of Bradford on Avon writes of its moral improvement because of Chartist influence. ‘Since the formation of the Female Society and the Working Men’s Association, the Bradford people have greatly improved. Drunkenness is on the decrease. Men and women have learned how to prize the virtue of moderation’.

‘A Man of Trowbridge’ describes the Chartist presence in the town in glowing terms: - ‘The Working Men’s Association... is progressing nobly. The young men of the town have formed a discussion class and...the ladies are infusing into the minds of all, a spirit of patriotic benevolence truly delightful.’²⁷

This correspondence points towards the social nature of the movement, in its many manifestations, as a primary driver. The vast meetings and processions appear to form the apex of a complex political theatre, exciting, as we have seen, the anxiety of local magistrates in direct proportion to the passionate embrace of its followers. But if it is the rhetoric, charisma and sheer courage of the local leadership and invited visiting speakers, that capture the hopes and aspirations of the crowd, it is also the stage management of their performances that makes them even more powerful and memorable. They appear to anticipate the dynamics of a contemporary summer festival, infused with the joy of music and dancing, of marching and flags and colourful costumes, rather than those of a modern political party conference, where hierarchical control of the proceedings is a central pre-occupation.

Part of the reason for this would have been purely practical. As Paul Pickering has intimated, only a small part of the crowd would have been able to hear the speaker in

²⁶ WV March 2, 1839

²⁷ ‘Original Correspondence’ *Western Vindicator* March 2, 1839 <<https://www.peoplescollection.wales>> [accessed November 26, 2022]

any event so that, ‘oratorical performance was only one aspect of the communication.’²⁸ Instead, according to Pickering, the speeches were often subsumed into a more complex, colourful, participatory performance that provided the crowd with a powerful sense of engagement and belonging: -

‘Chartist agitators inherited numerous images and emblems of popular iconography which they could incorporate into their public performance. Among this extensive range of symbols, we might include the traditional English radical colour of green, the red cap of liberty from the French revolution, and, most importantly, in the pre-Chartist era the white hat made famous by Henry Hunt.’²⁹

Several reported accounts of those early Trowbridge meetings reveal striking examples of such symbols and offer tantalizing glimpses into the sheer drama of the occasions which, with their carefully choreographed juxtapositions of light and dark, reason and menace, frailty and strength, must have been strangely compelling for all who witnessed them: -

‘In the evening, at seven o’clock, Mr. Vincent addressed about 1000 of the Radical Females in the large barrack room. At the conclusion of his address, the females formed four abreast and accompanied Mr. Vincent to his inn. The people surrounded the inn in large numbers until eleven o’clock when a band of music was provided, and a procession accompanied Mr. Vincent on his return to Bradford at midnight.’³⁰

‘Before starting, and in the presence of the assembled multitude’, (an estimated 30,000 people) ‘a young lady presented Mr. Vincent with a handsome green silk scarf for, and on behalf of the single ladies of Trowbridge, amidst the exclamations of the multitude.’³¹

²⁸ Paul Pickering, ‘Class without words: symbolic communication in the Chartist Movement’ *Past and Present* August 1, 1986, p.153 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/past/112.1.144>> [accessed September 15, 2023]

²⁹ Pickering, p.153

³⁰ ‘Public meeting of the women of Trowbridge’ *The Sun* January 21, 1839 <<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed October 20, 2022]

³¹ ‘Trowle Common Meeting’ *The Wiltshire Independent* September 30, 1839, <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed December 5, 2022]

‘The Working Men’s Association of Trowbridge had a large meeting by torchlight on Monday night last... The procession which passed through the town, had a very imposing appearance. In the front was a person carrying three loaves, showing the iniquity of the bread tax, after which followed the female association, upwards of one hundred persons carrying large torches.’³²

Embedded in these accounts are some of the contradictions that underpin the movement’s ideology and organization.³³ Gareth Stedman Jones, in his seminal essay, ‘Rethinking Chartism’, identifies within it a polarity, driven at one extreme, in the words of Carlyle, ‘by the bitter discontent grown fierce and mad... of the working classes of England’.³⁴ However, he argues that it was more than a blunt weapon of social protest. Instead, he suggests, it evolved as a political movement, predicated upon older articulations of radical discontent, originating in the 17th Century, and gathering momentum until the last decade of the 18th. Jones is at pains to point out that the language in which Chartism expressed itself was ‘constructed and inscribed within a complex rhetoric of metaphorical association, causal inference and imaginative construction... Its strength, indeed, its definition, was a critique of the corrupting effects of the concentration of political power and its corrosive influence upon a society deprived a proper means of political representation.’³⁵

This radicalism was clearly embedded in the polemic of those early speeches of Vincent, Roberts et al. But Stedman Jones points out that, as new economic forces begin to occlude the familiar target of ‘Old Corruption’, it was necessary ‘to attribute a growing number of economic evils to a political source’. This, in turn, meant ‘rejecting with less and less equivocation any compromise with political economy’ and confronting ‘an increasing distance from the bulk of its former middle-class constituency.’³⁶ ‘Economic evils’, as we have seen, were appearing in battalions in the town at around this time.³⁷ It was therefore hardly surprising to see the local Chartist

³² ‘Meeting at Trowbridge’ *The Northern Liberator* December 1, 1838, <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed April 23, 2023]

³³ See Asa Briggs, ‘The Local Background of Chartism’ *Chartist Studies* p.5

³⁴ See G. Stedman Jones, ‘Rethinking Chartism’ in *Languages of Class* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996) p.91

³⁵ Stedman Jones, p.102

³⁶ Stedman Jones, p.104

³⁷ See ‘Reports from Assistant Handloom Weavers Commissioners 1840’ *Parliamentary Papers* <<https://parlipapersproquestcom.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/parlipapers/result/pqpdocumentview?accountid=14697&p.409>> [accessed December 5, 2022]

demagogues sharpening that radical language into diatribes against local and national authorities, now perceived as the agents of all manner of distress, in a visceral, physical struggle to establish the principles of the Charter.

The consequences of this ‘vocabulary of political exclusion’ within the context of the Trowbridge movement, soon became evident. In the ‘Western Vindicator’ of March 2, 1839, the enfranchised, middle class beneficiaries of the 1832 Reform Act, were targeted in an excoriating attack: - ‘They begin to cry down those upon whose shoulders they were carried into office. They endeavoured to break up the union of the people, and to that effect, they transported the Dorchester Labourers.’ Only the suffrage can remedy this insidious injustice: - ‘It will not permit our representatives to tax us without our consent and ... it will put an end to the invidious and demoralizing inequality of rank and fortune which now exists in society.’³⁸

Stedman Jones’ insistence that the radicalism of Chartism should not be conflated with the determinism that welded together a militant working class as a consequence of industrialization and its cynical manipulations of labour, seems somewhat stretched in the context of this article. For, at this point, the Trowbridge Chartists appeared to abandon the sedate charm of the discussion clubs and the genteel tea parties they had shared with the local liberals, to pitch themselves - with a howl that Carlyle might sadly have recognized - onto the barricades.

However, in their attempts to evangelize towns and communities beyond Trowbridge, they encountered new resistances: - ‘physical force Toryism, an example of the deliberate use of violence for political ends... much more successful than physical force Chartism’.³⁹ The handwringing of the Trowbridge magistrates and the desultory efforts made by them to contain the growing militancy of its Chartists did not go unnoticed in neighbouring towns where more robust interventions were planned. ‘Confronted by creeping anarchy and mounting danger to the established order, Tory landed interests

³⁸ ‘Politics for the People’ *Western Vindicator* March 2, 1839 <<https://www.peoplescollection.wales>> [accessed January 17, 2023]

³⁹ Raymond Challinor, *A Radical Lawyer in Victorian Britain – W.P. Roberts and the Struggle for Workers’ Rights* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1990) p.19

resolved to see... whether they could stem the tide. Their opportunity came on 22 March 1839, when Henry Vincent... planned to address a rally in Devizes.’⁴⁰

A report in ‘The Salisbury and Winchester Journal’ from February 25, 1839 had revealed the growing threat of Chartist violence in Trowbridge, in an account which is darkly comic:- ‘One of the Trowbridge Chartists, with a stupidity as to the matter of consequences well befitting such persons, this week actually charged a man before the magistrates... with stealing a pike from him...It is said that the Chartists generally, in Trowbridge and its vicinity, are furnished with these deadly implements.’⁴¹

By March 9, ‘The Western Vindicator’ had published a pious rejection of physical force; ‘But we thirst for blood! “Blood”! We leave that to our rulers and the brutal Aristocracy and to those men who have bartered in the gore of India... to those who have stained the plains of Peterloo.’⁴²

The policy of expanding the Chartist campaign into the satellite rural communities around Trowbridge had already proved successful in villages near Warminster, where some agricultural labourers had shown enough interest to alarm the local magistrates.⁴³ Aggressive intrusions into this local diaspora of discontent – where brooding memories of the ‘Swing’ riots and their ruthless suppression would almost certainly not have disappeared – caused the authorities particular alarm; ‘Behind the fears arising from who could be trusted, lurked the most terrifying spectre of all for the Wiltshire Hierarchy – the nightmare vision of the poor and discontented in both rural and urban areas combining to make common cause.’⁴⁴

Their apprehensions were clearly justified. An account of the trial of Vincent, Roberts and Carrier, reported in ‘The Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette’ of March 12, 1840, included the testimony of one Wm Jackson, a witness to the start, in Trowbridge, of the second march on Devizes on April 1, 1839. Jackson records Carrier’s exhortation to his

⁴⁰ Challinor, p.19

⁴¹ ‘Local Intelligence’ *The Salisbury and Winchester Journal* February 25, 1839, <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed March 15, 2023]

⁴² ‘An address from the Wotton-under-Edge Working Men’s Association’ *Western Vindicator* March 9, 1839, <<https://www.peoplescollection.wales>> [accessed November 03, 2022]

⁴³ See Challinor, p.19

⁴⁴ Challinor, p.18

followers. ‘Carrier had a life-preserver handed to him. He said, “We are going to Devizes. These are the weapons you must use, but you are not to lay about... the poor smock-frocked fellows but the dandy jack boot fellows.” He then handed back the preserver and said, “If that won’t do, I have something here that will, and he took from his pocket a pistol.”’⁴⁵

Two attempts were made to carry the Chartist message to Devizes, a quiet rural town some twelve miles east of Trowbridge, situated at the centre of a belt of rich arable land which provided significant local employment: precisely that constituency in which the Chartists hoped to extend their influence. The first of these took place on Friday, March 22 and it was immediately clear that significant physical resistance had been organized in advance. ‘A young dandy, dreadfully drunk, at the head of about 50 well-armed Tories... shouted ‘Down with Vincent... Burdett forever.’ It was now nearly dark; flint stones, mud and sticks were flying in all directions.’⁴⁶

It was the second visit, however, made on Monday, April 1, 1839, that, according to much of the historiography, marked a watershed in Chartist tactics and, indeed, the confidence with which it had resorted to such muscular forms of evangelism.

Vincent’s own account of the disaster is recorded in two remarkably jocular reports for the ‘Western Vindicator’ of April 6 and April 13 respectively. For a man who came close to losing his life at the hands of the ‘Tory mob’, the accounts are disarmingly precise. Clearly, there may have been some exaggeration of the nature of the violence, although reports from other sources confirm the thrust of events described.

The march from Trowbridge seems to have been relatively uneventful. Indeed, it appears to have performed precisely that function for which it had been designed: - ‘We passed through several small villages and were joined by all the labourers who were sufficiently free from the trammels of the Aristocrats.’ But, before arriving at the town, Vincent was given a note; ‘Tories of Devizes armed with a brace of pistols, determined to make a colander of Vincent and Carrier’. Undeterred, the march continued towards

⁴⁵ ‘The Chartist Trials’ *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette* March 12, 1840, <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed March 7, 2023]

⁴⁶ ‘The Life and Rambles of Henry Vincent’ *Western Vindicator* March 30, 1839, <<https://www.peoplescollection.wales>> [accessed November 03, 2022]

the marketplace where a farm cart had been set up as a hustings. Upon arriving, Vincent records having seen ‘the Lancers under arms, a large number of special constables...(and) large bodies of men, many of whom appeared to be railway labourers’.

His speech was cut short before it began: ‘Mr. Roberts and myself jumped onto the hustings, when a stone struck me on the back part of the head and knocked me out of the wagon... I saw many well-dressed persons, directing the attack, armed with pistols... Finding the confusion increase, and being in the midst of clubs striking in all directions, I gave up all hope of preserving my own life...’⁴⁷

Vincent, Roberts and Carrier, the swashbuckling leaders of the Trowbridge Chartists for the first year of its energetic growth, did manage to escape from Devizes with the help of a high-minded sheriff and some of his associates, but their confidence was undermined, and their leadership compromised by their humiliation at the hands of a mob even more incensed than their own. The sneering account of the event in the ‘Devizes Gazette’ is revealing in its contempt for the campaign, clearly representing the views of a very different demographic: - ‘Achilles certainly could not have done more; and Mr. Vincent could not have attained such nerve, unless, like his great prototype, he had been fed with the marrow of wild beasts.... Devizes has nobly done its duty and set an example of energy and vigour which, we hope and trust, will not be lost ... upon those towns which are situated in the agricultural districts: for the corruption of the agricultural population is now avowedly one of the principal objects of those emissaries of darkness who for this especial purpose, are roaming through the provinces in every direction.’⁴⁸

An altogether more elegiac tone is apparent in a letter from a girl aged 14 to her brother in London, reproduced in the ‘Wiltshire Times’ of Jan 9, 1915: ‘Trowbridge, for some months, has been in a very disturbed and miserable state, owing to the Chartists, as everyone there below the highest classes, belongs to that society. About six weeks ago, they went up to Devizes to make a disturbance there by holding a meeting. But the

⁴⁷ ‘The Life and Rambles of Henry Vincent’ *Western Vindicator* April 6, 1839
<<https://www.peoplescollection.wales>> [accessed November 03, 2022]

⁴⁸ ‘The Chartists’ *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette* April 4, 1839, <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed January 14, 2023]

Devizes farmers were prepared to meet them; they tore their banners, beat them all around the town, and sent the poor Chartists home quite discomfited... I saw them when they returned and they looked so terribly frightened and crestfallen, compared to their triumph when they set out in the morning.⁴⁹

The shock waves caused by 'The Battle of Devizes' resonated for a short time in further acts of sullen resistance. This is from the Gazette of May 2, 1839: 'You can scarcely depict in too vivid colours the dreadfully demoralized and disorganized state of the working classes of this town (Trowbridge). They have broken church windows – once even while the Rector was holding a service; they set fire to a rick. They have infected Holt, Bradley, Steeple Ashton... No person with a decent coat on his back can be seen without being hooted. The special constables are afraid to act, and the trade of the town is seriously injured.'⁵⁰

However, the authorities were about to push back. The arrest and trial of Vincent, Roberts and Carrier would send powerful messages to the local Chartists about the consequences of 'seditious' campaigning and incitement. The middle classes had, for the most part, abandoned a cause which was being represented in their own press as dangerously anarchic. And there had been no breakthrough, either with the Charter itself, or in ameliorating the working and living conditions that affected so many in and around the town.

Michael Lansdown writes that 'The Battle of Devizes' marked a crisis in Wiltshire from which the Chartists never recovered.⁵¹ That assertion is contested, as the next chapter will show, although it may well have marked a watershed in the campaign's efforts to recruit from the agricultural areas. For, as Steve Poole points out, 'Chartism's weakness was the inability of its leadership to address rural concerns in relevant language, in an idiom that recognized distinctions between rural and urban experience.'⁵²

⁴⁹ 'Chartists in Trowbridge in 1839' *The Wiltshire Times* January 9, 1915 <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed April 5, 2023]

⁵⁰ 'Melancholy Picture – Trowbridge' *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette* May 2, 1839, <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed March 17, 2023]

⁵¹ Michael Lansdown, *The Trowbridge Chartists* (Trowbridge, West Wilts Historical Association, 1997) p.19

⁵² Steve Poole, 'Chartism and Rural Workers in Wiltshire', *Wiltshire Industrial History* (Trowbridge, Watermarx, 2011) p.17

The *Devizes Gazette* would undoubtedly have concurred. On March 28, 1839, before the decisive second visit, it had warned: - 'These Chartists – these pretended friends of the working classes – endeavour to impress upon the agricultural labourer that he is not half paid for his labour, while at the same time, they want to exact a portion of his small pittance (as they call it) in order to maintain them in idleness... If he (the labourer) is tempted to repeat the evil deeds of the deluded followers of Swing, let him call to mind their fearful retribution and the fiend will depart from his soul.'⁵³

The trials that awaited Vincent, Roberts and Carrier, as well as others amongst the Trowbridge leadership may not have resulted in the vindictive sentences imposed upon the 'Swing' leadership or the Dorset Labourers – although Carrier was all but broken by his two years of hard labour - but they did subdue the campaign and oblige it to take a new direction.

Writing of Thelwell, of the London Corresponding Society, and his radical essays from the 1790s, E.P. Thompson identifies a constant dilemma: - 'How were the unrepresented... to effect their objects? As the Chartists termed it, 'moral' or 'physical' force? Again and again, between 1792 and 1848, this dilemma was to recur. The Jacobin or Chartist, who implied the threat of overwhelming numbers but who held back from actual revolutionary preparation, was always exposed... both to the loss of the confidence of his own supporters and the ridicule of his opponents.'⁵⁴

From 1837 to 1839, the Chartists of Trowbridge had been impaled upon the horns of this dilemma. The following years would add to their anguish but would also provide them with the beginnings of a new methodology with which to improve working conditions for their long-suffering constituency.

⁵³ 'The Chartists', *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette* March 28, 1839, <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed November 15, 2022]

⁵⁴ Thompson, p.175

3 Reprisals and Recoveries: 1840-1842

As the local authorities, supported by the national government and courts, pushed back against the often-anarchic energy of the Chartists in the summer of 1839, divisions, apparent within the organisation from its beginnings, began, once again, to widen. Its republican – Jacobin – pre-occupations with the corruption of government had been a powerful driver and had furnished it with much of the energy that fuelled its first wave of meetings and marches.¹ But it had depended as much upon those of a more reflective persuasion, both in its national leadership as well as its local organisation. For this cohort, the preoccupation was with articulating a new ‘language of constitutionalism’ that would legitimise its political authority and open gateways for the Chartists themselves to access power.²

The legal action taken against the Chartist leadership responsible for much of the Trowbridge campaign would turn out to mark a watershed in its evolution. For, although the campaign of mass meetings and processions continued into 1842 and beyond, many of its disruptions were contained by more coordinated operations between the local magistrates, local militias and yeomanry and a nascent police force.³ In May, 1839, Carrier, Potts and Roberts were committed to Fisherton Gaol, facing charges of sedition for their actions in Trowbridge and in July, Vincent, too, was arraigned. Lovett himself was arrested in Birmingham on the following day, provoking outrage in the Chartist press. O’Connor, writing to Sir John Russell in the ‘Northern Star’ on the same day,

¹ See ‘Bath’ *Western Vindicator* April 13, 1839

<<https://www.peoplescollection.wales>> [accessed October 10, 2022]

² See Joshua Gibson, ‘The Political Thought of the Chartist Movement’ p.36

<<https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.24324>> [accessed November 15, 2023]

³ See R.B. Pugh ‘Chartism in Wiltshire and Somerset’ in *Chartist Studies* ed. Asa Briggs (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1977) p.193

stated: - 'I hope to show that Radicalism, as advocated by its supporters, is, day after day, receiving increased strength and vigour; while the power of its Whig opponents becomes correspondingly diminished by their opposition'⁴

At their trial, in March, 1840, Carrier, Potts and Roberts demonstrated a similar defiance, born of their own passionate convictions and a contempt for the proceedings of what they considered to be a hopelessly compromised judicial system. Before the formal proceedings began, Carrier raised an objection to a juror on the ground that he enjoyed the benefit of the franchise and was able to vote;⁵ He played to the gallery, in spite of a growing litany of evidence gravely offered by witnesses who had been careful to record his inflammatory incitements at various Trowbridge meetings; "I play several instruments. I can't swear they were not playing 'Such a Getting Upstairs'". For this comment, he was rebuked by the judge: "We do business seriously."⁶

Carrier's decision to defend himself reflects his naiveté concerning the nature of court proceedings; Roberts had been cautious enough to seek counsel, whose closing remarks seem to have ensured that his sentence was less draconian than those imposed upon his two co-conspirators, both of whom had practised trade in the town.⁷ In any event, Carrier's cavalier performance:- 'the witness was then cross-examined at very great length by Carrier and Potts, but the trifling and irrelevancy shown by these two parties would render a detail perfectly absurd' – did little to protect him from the full force of

⁴ 'Letter to Rt Hon Lord Russell' *Northern Star*, July 14, 1839

<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed Oct 15, 2022]

⁵ Trial account' *HO 40-48-5* p.663 National Archives <<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>>

⁶ *Ho-40-48-5* p.663ff

⁷ *HO 40-48-5* p.663ff

the law.⁸ Roberts was sentenced to one year and Carrier and Potts to two years, Carrier with hard labour.

Less than six months later, Carrier wrote a letter, through the correspondence columns of the *Northern Star*, thanking Mr James Moir and the Scottish Complete Suffrage Union for a gift of money designed to mitigate the circumstances of his incarceration in the 'Devizes House of Correction'. This letter is a profound reminder of just how powerful the pushback from the government was, in deterring all but the most resilient campaigners from future belligerence: - 'I suppose you know something of my treatment here. It is precisely that of a convicted felon; my hair cropped off close to my head, clothed in prison dress. The diet – bread, potatoes, a little oatmeal boiled in water, and this is all I have, though obliged to work on the treadmill which I consider the extremest degradation and most refined torture possible to invent... This affair has broken up my home, scattered my few books I know not whither and completed my ruin in every respect.'⁹

Carrier's early release from prison after the intervention of a local MP, reveals much about the shift in focus amongst local Chartists in the wake of the first rejection of the National Petition in 1839. In his paper on Chartist prisoners, Christopher Godfrey writes: - 'The campaign in support of the Chartist prisoners came to be the most important facet of radical activity in Britain during 1840 and '41'.¹⁰

⁸ 'The Chartist Trials' *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette* March 12, 1840
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed April 30, 2023]

⁹ 'Letter from William Carrier' *Northern Star* September 5, 1840
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed May 5, 2023]

¹⁰ Christopher Godfrey 'The Chartist Prisoners: 1839-41' p.210
<<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859000006039>> [accessed March 20, 2023]

An article in 'The Morning Advertiser' of November 9, 1841, provides details of the attempt, by his sympathisers, to offer their support to a man who had clearly been traumatised by the experience of prison. A formal meeting was arranged as a reception for Carrier as well as an opportunity to pass resolutions decrying his treatment.

Duncombe, the Bath M.P., said, 'he had paid great attention to all the cases that he had had the honour to lay before Parliament, and he considered there was none so prominent than that of Wm Carrier.... the judge who tried them said that...as Carrier was a working man, and seemingly an active working man, his imprisonment must be accompanied by hard labour. That might have been an act of charity on the part of the Judge, imagining that Carrier, as a working man, could not do without hard labour. (Cries of 'Hear! Hear!' and 'Shame! Shame!')'¹¹

The warmth of his reception, the rousing cheers for his sacrifice, the financial gifts offered by his supporters to provide some degree of compensation; all of these failed to restore William Carrier to his former station in life in Trowbridge. A sad epilogue to his story is revealed in a letter to the 'Northern Star' of January 22, 1842: - 'Sir, Many enquiries having been made as to what has become of Mr Carrier and whether he has received the amount due to him from the benefit at the Social Hall on Nov 8, 1841. In answer to the first, I beg to state that he sailed from Liverpool on Thursday, December 30th last... Mr Carrier – having left his wife and child at Trowbridge, at his request, the money, when paid, is to be forwarded to Mrs Carrier.'¹²

¹¹ 'Celebration of William Carrier's release from Prison' *Morning Advertiser* November 9, 1841
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed April 10, 2023]

¹² 'Case of Carrier, the Chartist Victim' *Northern Star* January 22, 1842
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed April 10, 2023]

Roberts and Vincent were released to pursue lives less traumatised than that of their former campaigning colleague. It is not difficult to infer that perceptions of class – think of the ‘wit’ of that judge with his gift of ‘hard labour’ – may have played no small part in their experience of incarceration. Certainly, both were able to participate again in the movement, even if, in the case of Vincent, in roles less provocative to the authorities, than before.

Vincent, like Carrier, had written letters from prison, often to his friend, John Milikin.¹³ Their tone is so remarkably different from those of his former colleague on the platforms and hustings around Trowbridge, that it is hard to imagine that they had been convicted and punished for identical crimes. Vincent’s letters are full of vibrant energy, often containing highly suggestive and salacious content, This is from September, 1840, written in Monmouth Prison:- ‘I was dreaming that an angel lay in my arms, and that her swelling bosom was beating against mine, and propelling my sluggish blood, with a sort of steam engine force.’¹⁴ The licentious timbre continues through much of the correspondence, indicating not only a spirit undeterred by incarceration but also revealing something of the complexity of the signifiers which had provided the movement with its peculiar metalanguage; a subject of sustained interest in much of its historiography.¹⁵

Scriven links these letters to earlier accounts from Trowbridge, when Vincent’s ‘sexual availability was even written into pageantry by female activists.’¹⁶ ‘I was presented with

¹³ See Tom Scriven ‘Humour, Satire and Sexuality in the Culture of Early Chartism’ <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X13000186>>[accessed December 15, 2022]

¹⁴ Scriven, p.157

¹⁵ Stedman Jones, pp.90-178

¹⁶ Scriven, p.165

a handsome green silk scarf by a pretty smiling young lady who trembled from head to foot. She put it round me herself in the presence of the assembled thousands for and on behalf of the single ladies of that town.’¹⁷

‘The act is comparable to other acts of symbolic practice noted in the historiography of Chartism. In this case, the silk represented the women’s roles as labourers within the declining weaving industry, the green represented radicalism, and their selection as single women represented the sexuality of youth, and the evident eligibility of Vincent, creating a sort of symbolic version of the artisan’s courtship process.’¹⁸

However, these letters – their tone emulated in Vincent’s newspaper, the ‘Western Vindicator’ - mark an ending, or at least a transition into a more sober register which characterises much of the correspondence of the Trowbridge Chartists from 1840 onwards. In short, ‘the Chartism of the late libertarian, irreverent and sometimes obscene culture of late Georgian and Regency London’ gives way to something that we would recognise as more obviously ‘Victorian’.¹⁹

Vincent’s emergence from prison as a ‘reformed’ Chartist, pre-occupied with the virtues of orthodox Christianity, teetotal abstinence, and moderation in all things, marks this watershed. Carrier’s fate is, perhaps, more representative of the experience of incarceration for many Chartist prisoners, ending, as it does, in humiliation and ignominy. In any event, a new wave of Chartist thinkers and leaders was emerging in

¹⁷ Scriven, p.165

¹⁸ Scriven, p.165

¹⁹ Scriven, p.160

Trowbridge; less iconoclastic in their behaviours; more measured in their language and, probably, their thought.

Job Rawlings was a significant – and remarkable - participant in the movement in its second iteration after the incarceration of its first iconoclasts. In the references to him in a variety of newspaper articles, as well as in his own pronouncements, he seems anchored by the privations of his fellow citizens and by his simple Christian faith. His first significant appearance coincides with the publication of his ‘Animadversions upon a Sermon preached by Mr John Warburton, Minister of the Gospel, Trowbridge upon the doctrine of Non-resistance to the Higher Powers’.²⁰ Rawlings’ religious sensibilities appear to have been a major driver in his embrace of the Chartist cause and when this caused friction with his local minister, he demonstrated the kind of simple moral courage that empowered him in the eyes of his colleagues and intimidated those more equivocal in their support for the movement. Warburton had preached an evening sermon on Sunday May 26, 1839 to a large congregation at the Zion Chapel in Trowbridge in which he advocated the doctrine of ‘political stillness and unlimited obedience to higher powers’.²¹ The minister had already excommunicated some of his members for attending meetings of the Trowbridge WMA with one, Robert Lucas, baptised by Warburton on August 23, 1829, recorded in the church book as ‘Separated, turned Chartist’.²² Rawlings accused Warburton of hypocrisy, calling his salary a ‘gospel tax’ upon the labouring poor and berating him for indulging employers in his congregation, who ‘pay little more than half the wages due.’²³

²⁰ See J.R.Broome *John Warburton, Servant of a Covenant God* (Harpden: Gospel Standard Trust Publications,1996) p.159

²¹ Broome, p.159

²² Broome, p.160

²³ Broome, p.160

In a review of Rawlings' pamphlet in 'The Charter' a correspondent describes his comments as having 'in a calm and Christian spirit, laid bare the sophistry and exhibited the persecuting spirit of this over-zealous gentleman.' (Warburton)²⁴

Rawlings does not always appear 'calm and Christian' in his articulations of the Chartists' case, but his approach is very different from that of Vincent, Roberts and Carrier. He seems grounded in the working culture of the town and over the next two years busies himself in establishing agencies which not only promote the Charter amongst the local population, but establish new structures of communication and self-expression which will, over time, help to empower a class, as yet, barely conscious of itself. For it is in the detail of his actions, as well as the thoughtful political and social analysis of several of his colleagues over the next two years, that Chartism in Trowbridge reveals itself to be far from marginalised by the failure of its first militant wave of resistance. From a rich source of primary evidence in the Chartist, local and national press, it is clear that a coalescence of Carlyle's 'distracted incoherent embodiment of Chartism' into a more organised cadre of politically conscious and articulate activists, is taking shape.²⁵

In May, 1840, in a letter to the secretaries of every WMA in the country, Rawlings again attacks the churches, dissenting and established, for ignoring 'the present distress of the labouring classes' promoting another pamphlet, the publication of which lead to his dismissal 'from the employment of Mr John Clark, magistrate of the town, after a

²⁴ 'Animadversions, etc' *The Charter* July 14, 1839
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed November 10, 2022]

²⁵ See Stedman Jones, p.90

servitude of nearly twenty years, without one proper notice, during which servitude I was never once charged with neglect of business or waste of time through idleness or drunkenness.’²⁶

The seriousness of this correspondence, its cold defiance expressed in very different language from the wild polemic of Vincent and Carrier, seems to characterise this change into a mood of quiet resolution. And indeed, as an article in the ‘Southern Star’ reveals, Rawlings had been a key agent in the purchase of the ‘Democratic Chapel’, a Chartist hub in Trowbridge that became a well-known venue for meetings, commerce and social events, all organised by the WMA. A reference to the chapel is made in August, 1839, when it is noted that ‘a room has been licensed in Trowbridge as a place of worship for the Chartists.’ But its purchase dramatically extended its function. It is worth noting some of the recorded details of its first meeting: - ‘About eighty persons (male and female) sat down to an excellent dinner which had been entirely prepared by the members themselves, upon their own premises. Mr Rawlings said grace and after a most sumptuous repast the cloth was removed and Mr John Moores, treasurer of the association, was called to the chair. The chairman said, ‘Brothers and Sisters – We are met upon a most important occasion to celebrate the purchase of a place of meeting, never before known in the history of Chartism.’²⁷

The report continues in some detail, detailing the tribulations experienced in the negotiations. Evicted from the barracks, their first meeting place, they had rented the ‘present place’ but had faced increasing harassment from the authorities ‘at the time of

²⁶ ‘Original Correspondence’ *Northern Star* May 9, 1840
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed April 28, 2023]

²⁷ ‘Festival at Trowbridge, Wilts’ *Southern Star* June 28, 1840
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed November 10, 2022]

the riots in Wales’, when ‘their rooms were broken into by policemen and searched for arms’ Having found nothing but a banner, ‘such was their chagrin at the disappointment they had met with, that they pierced the poor banner in sundry places with their cutlasses. (Laughter)’.²⁸ It is interesting to note the tone of the report, demonstrating a self-assurance bordering on the self-satisfied at the sheer wonder of having managed to outbid those local Tories who had clearly attempted to intimidate the landlord from whom they eventually made the purchase for the sum of £250.00, almost all of which had been raised by the Chartists themselves. Rawlings gets a specific mention for ‘having contributed largely to their purpose’.

Clearly the report is partisan but it’s hard not to be impressed by the earnestness of the speeches as the Trowbridge Chartists attempt to reconsolidate after the disaster of Devizes and the incarceration of their local leaders. Moores congratulates his audience on having ‘ultimately succeeded in procuring a temple of their own’; a ‘Mr Hawkins’ ‘trusted that due attention would be paid to the rising generation, as regarded their education in the great principles of truth and justice’ Mr Bolwell of Bath, a well-known regional leader of the movement, sums up the proceedings having risen, ‘with feelings of pure delight (saying) how glorious was the reflection that a few Chartists in the small town of Trowbridge had accomplished so great an object’ The meeting ends with a variety of songs: ‘The Democrat Bold’, ‘The Pretty Moth’ and speeches to honour Vincent and Lovett.²⁹

According to this account, a new incarnation of Chartism seems to have arrived in the town. The purchase of the Democratic Chapel – which, ironically, enfranchised its

²⁸ *Southern Star* June 28, 1840

²⁹ *Southern Star* June 28, 1840

owners with the status of property holding citizens - represents more than the status of its title. Within a report of less than five hundred words are revealed many of the strands that refined the movement into the early 1840s; the evidence of its co-operative spirit, its faith in discourse and debate and education, its pride in its self-reliance (the excellent dinner), its trumping of the forces of authority, not by 'physical force' but laughter at the 'poor banner', molested by the police, its relaxed attitude to gender and its ability to access popular song and poetry in order to amplify its sense of itself within the broader culture. Clearly, the Trowbridge Chartists feel far from defeated at this point.

A year later, Rawlings wrote to 'the shareholders of the Democratic premises and the public generally.' In a communication designed to raise funds, he was at pains to celebrate the progress made in the chapel's first year. The premises now consist not only of 'a meeting house... where the people can meet and discuss their grievances, no one daring to make them afraid', but converted tenements, one for carrying on the grocery and linen drapery business, known by the name of Charter House; the rest are private dwellings.'³⁰

The establishment and adaptation of the Democratic Chapel, referred to so positively in these reports, can also be seen as a confirmation of Stedman Jones' assertion that Chartism was – or at least was becoming – a political movement rather than a 'social phenomenon'. In the language and metalanguage of the chapel, 'a particular political vocabulary' was beginning 'to convey a practicable hope of a general alternative and a believable means of realising it such that potential recruits can think within its terms'.³¹

³⁰ 'Trowbridge Democratic Chapel' *Northern Star* June 12, 1841
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed May 3, 2023]

³¹ Stedman Jones, p.96

Not only did the Trowbridge Chartists now have their own ‘temple’; They had the beginnings of an independently managed co-operative society as well.

As well as consolidating their status and self-assurance with premises that reflected their seriousness and purpose in the summer of 1841, the voice of the Trowbridge Chartists was now being heard – and taken seriously- on a wider stage. A remarkable letter, published in the pages of the *Northern Star* in May, reveals a gravitas and political sophistication very different from the earlier bombast of the hustings. The letter is written in response to Lovett’s call for the ‘New Move’. In April, Lovett had called for a change in direction of the Chartist campaign, proposing that ‘all who signed the national petition’ sign up – and pay for - a new association ‘for the Promoting of the Political and Social Improvement of the People’.³² Predicated upon a more formal approach to education as a means of social and economic elevation, he favoured the dispatch of ‘Missionaries to enlighten local populations’, (the establishment of) circulating libraries, print(ed) tracts and ... public halls and schools for the people.’³³

Lovett’s piety edges into the pompous when he reflects negatively upon those aspects of the earlier campaign which he deems to have been frivolous or ostentatious: ‘We have wasted glorious means of usefulness in foolish displays and gaudy trappings, seeking to captivate the sense rather than inform the mind, and aping the proceedings of a tinselled and corrupt aristocracy rather than aspiring to the mental and moral dignity of a pure democracy.’³⁴

³² ‘Chartist Intelligence’ *Northern Star* April 10, 1841
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed June 1, 2023]

³³ *Northern Star* April 10, 1841

³⁴ *Northern Star* April 10

Predictably, the response of O'Connor's *Northern Star* is apoplectic: - 'We believe this secret movement to be fraught with mischief and we hesitate not to brave all of the displeasure of its authors by exposing it'.³⁵

The Trowbridge Chartists' response is more measured and, in its rebuttal of Lovett's condescensions, provides a perfect example for all of that historiography which wrestles with the origins of 'social being' and 'social consciousness' explored primarily by Thompson.³⁶ Indeed, their observations might have been used as an example, by Stedman Jones himself, reflecting on the 'pre- or extra-discursive primacy accorded to social being' (which) 'drew upon older... indigenous traditions.'³⁷ In this essay, Jones explores the arbitrary nature of language, juxtaposing the ideas of Locke and Carlyle, and suggests that cultural signifiers can transcend Lovett's 'printed tracts'. Moreover, they are often found in precisely those 'foolish displays and gaudy trappings' that Lovett affects to despise. The Trowbridge Chartists, nodding towards Stedman Jones from 1841, seem to know better: -

'We incline to the belief that these displays and trappings... have often... been the means of encouraging a social and enquiring spirit and waking up honest ignorance from its hereditary torpor. Many, we believe, that are destined to play a high and glorious part in our emancipation from slavery, first heard the truths of Universal Brotherhood... in conjunction with bands, banners, music and processions, and the other gewgaws and puerilities so cunningly designed for our abasement.'³⁸

³⁵ *Northern Star* April 10

³⁶ See Thompson, p.5

³⁷ Gareth Stedman Jones, 'The Return of Language' in *Political Languages in the Age of Extremes* ed. by W. Steinmetz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) p.333

³⁸ 'To the Chartists of Great Britain' *Northern Star* May 1, 1841

<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed June 1, 2023]

In this single example of their eloquence, the Trowbridge Chartists reveal themselves to be particularly alert to the nuances of language and presentation that made their campaign so successful in its first incarnation.

But in the same correspondence, they are equally disparaging about the hectoring editorial style of the 'Star' itself, and powerful in their attack: - 'We believe that the spirit of invective and dogmatism which has lately sullied the pages of the 'Northern Star'... is in a general sense unwise.'³⁹

The paper's response, sullen and equivocal, reveals, if briefly, the authority of the Trowbridge letter; - 'Now do not let our Trowbridge friends again misunderstand us. We are not speaking of person, but of a plan. We do not call Messrs Lovett and Collins 'Thieves, liars and traitors...' though our Trowbridge friends have so adroitly introduced these pretty epithets... as to make it seem as though we had.'⁴⁰

Ironically, such seems to have been the authority of O'Connor and Hill at the 'Northern Star', that a rather abject letter of retraction from Trowbridge appears adjacent to the Star's response. Lovett is described as 'more Whiggish than we expected'; O'Connor, 'the unflinching advocate for the rights of the people.'⁴¹ Clearly, the New Move had divided Trowbridge, in spite of its epistolary eloquence, perhaps not least as a consequence of O'Connor's thundering calls for loyalty.

³⁹ *Northern Star* May 1, 1841

⁴⁰ *Northern Star* May 1, 1841

⁴¹ 'Trowbridge, 34, Mortimer St, April 28' *Northern Star* May 1, 1841<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed June 1, 2023]

More divisions were to come later in the year, but the sense gained from reports in the local, as well as the Chartist press is that, in spite of ideological conflicts exacerbated by the vanities of its leadership, the local movement remained, for a while, grounded in its campaign to promote the Charter and to lobby for Chartist prisoners. On June 3, Henry Vincent, rehabilitated – and remarkably unscathed – by his imprisonment at Newport, ‘gave a lecture from the sacred Scripture for the benefit of Mr John Frost in Charter Square.’ In front of 2000 people ‘two children were handed up to Mr Vincent for him to name them in public: Henry Vincent Haswell and John Frost Haswell’. Clearly, Chartism still commanded remarkable devotion within the town.⁴²

A schism appears to have occurred in the autumn of 1841 which seems to have had significant consequences. An oblique reference is made to it at the West of England/Wales regional conference where the Trowbridge representative, J. Haswell, ‘said the fact was, a party of professed Christians had sprung up in Trowbridge who were constantly sowing divisions.’⁴³ By December, things appear to have deteriorated. In statements to the General Council, the Trowbridge membership is rebuked for having allowed the split to have worsened: - ‘One portion of the members have taken a fresh place of meeting’. They have also modified their declaration: - ‘I _____, believe in the inspiration of the Old and New Testament; and do hereby pledge my word to use all lawful and just means in my power to cause the People’s Charter to be the law of the land.’⁴⁴

⁴² ‘Trowbridge’ *Wiltshire Independent* June 3, 1841
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed April 18, 2023]

⁴³ ‘Conference’ *Northern Star* October 23, 1841
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed April 18, 2023]

⁴⁴ ‘The Executive of the National Council...’ *Northern Star* December 9, 1841
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed April 28, 2023]

The antagonists in this schism are not named, but might well have included Job Rawlings, whose steadfast commitment to the principles of the Charter as a means of improving the lot of his fellow men seems to have transcended, at least in spirit, its internal divisions. For on December 23, his speech to the County Council of December 8, shouted down by the Tories at the time, is printed in full in the ‘Wiltshire Independent’. Too long to include here in full, it nevertheless reveals, once again, the powerful conviction of those parochial, self-educated Chartists of Trowbridge whose oratory and polemical style would not seem out of place in Parliament itself. In the following extract, that idiolect drawn from both biblical and literary sources, reveals the extraordinary eloquence of individual Chartists, schooled in their Mutual Improvement Societies, dissenting churches, and reading groups, their letter writing circles and committee reporting protocols, that the movement had accessed in order to create a new and powerful political class.⁴⁵

‘England, the rich pasture of the whole earth, on which God hath shed abundantly of the riches of his goodness, that that our store houses are full, and our barns running over...But alas, that monster sin has reared its gigantic head and shed its poisonous influence throughout the length and breadth of our land. Covetousness, that cursed fiend of the bottomless pit, has gone forth upon the black horse of tyrants’ power, and has robbed and spoiled the industrious classes of the comfort and happiness of their life, so that our delightful senses of rural beauty are turned into a horrid picture of misery’.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ See Griffin, ‘The Making of the Chartists’

⁴⁶ ‘To the Nobility and Gentry of Wilts’ *Wiltshire Independent* December 23, 1841<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed April 29, 2023]

The juxtaposition of metaphor – arcadian and apocalyptic – from the pen of this Trowbridge autodidact with, presumably, only limited access to the rudiments of literacy, seems astonishing today, especially when judged against contemporary examples of political polemic.

By the end January of 1842, as the local economy continued to falter and the pressure for the second petition grew, the polemic of the Trowbridge Chartists was ratcheted up yet again, although the tone seems more desperate and nihilistic than anything that has gone before. At a meeting to acknowledge the receipt of £400.00 from the government, ‘to be distributed amongst the poor of this place’, a ‘memorial’ is proposed by way of reply. That extraordinary idiolect is evident again, tempered now with quiet rage and incredulity:- ‘...having been informed of your generous charity awarded as a temporary relief to our starving families... (we) apprise her Majesty’s Government that we, as Englishmen, do not desire charity as much as justice... we should deem it more charity from them in sending down a troop of human butchers to dispatch a thousand of us, than keep us lingering out a useless life by starvation...let them listen to the prayer of the working millions set forth in the National Petition and make the People’s Charter a Cabinet measure...’⁴⁷

1842 continued to be a difficult year for the Chartists of Trowbridge and, as it progressed, there is an increasing sense of its energy being sapped by factionalism, both within the town and on the national platform. A major shock, preceding the catastrophic second rejection of the Charter in May, was the fall-out from the Sturge Declaration, in March. This, once again, appears to have exacerbated schisms amongst the local

⁴⁷ ‘Mock Charity’ *Northern Star* January 29, 1842 <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed April 29, 2023]

membership. Philp and Vincent, apparent converts to the Complete Suffrage Union in Bath, were well known in Trowbridge and their vilification at the hands of O'Connor and the 'Northern Star' immediately re-opened the old fault lines from 1841.⁴⁸ Two rival conferences took place in Birmingham on April 5 with Vincent, 'representing the workers', appearing with the Sturgeists.⁴⁹

On March 31, the *Wiltshire Independent* had reported a 'Large Public Meeting in Trowbridge' at which Job Rawlings called for 'a union between them (the class to which he belonged) and the middle classes for the attainment of Reform.'⁵⁰ Rawlings and the Trowbridge Chartists appear, once again, to have attempted to mediate the brutal attacks from O'Connor against the treachery of the Bath Sturgeists, who would, themselves, soon equivocate, citing misrepresentation in a report in the 'Northern Star' by the hapless Bartlett. It was he – the 'Publicola' of those glorious first editions of the 'Western Vindicator' - who had reported the Bath meeting for the Northern Star.⁵¹ Clearly, the mutual suspicions between classes, which had characterised the divisions from the start had never been eradicated, in spite of the worthy efforts of the Trowbridge executive, to bridge the divide.

The rejection of the Charter in May must have been a profound disappointment for the Trowbridge men, not least because of Roebuck's (the member for Bath) assertion that it had been drawn up by 'a malignant and cowardly demagogue' (O'Connor).⁵² When we

⁴⁸ 'The Adhesion of Vincent and Philp... to the Sturge Declaration' *Northern Star* March 19, 1842

<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed May 5, 2023]

⁴⁹ See Mark Hovell 'The Chartist Movement:Chapter xvi'

<https://minorvictorianwriters.org.uk/hovell/c_chartist_movement_6.htm> [accessed June 15, 2023]

⁵⁰ 'Large Public Meeting in Trowbridge' *Wiltshire Independent* March 31, 1842

<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed May 3, 2023]

⁵¹ See 'Bartlett v. Vincent, Philp and Roberts' *Northern Star* April 2, 1842

<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed May 5, 2023]

⁵² See Hovell, Chapter xvi

remember that Roebuck was supporting the Charter, we must wonder at his tactics!

Whatever the cause, the rejection was clearly demoralising. Shortly afterwards, on June 4, 1842, the *Northern Star* reports the opening of ‘a new Chartist place of worship’ under the auspices of Rawlings, ‘who informs us that his services have lately been interdicted in the places where he formerly dispensed the word of life, because of his inviting the clergy to co-operate with him in procuring civil and political rights for the people.’⁵³

The narrative closure of this chapter in Trowbridge’s colourful history is, as intimated in the introduction, ragged, and the resolution of Rawling’s extraordinary biography, still scratchily elusive. O’Connor’s visit to the town in August 1843, marred by a poorly supported, ticketed event at the Hope Chapel - ‘not so full as might have been desired’ - must mark its end.⁵⁴ Perhaps the people of Trowbridge had decided that the true orators and curators of the movement had primarily resided in their own town and that visiting demagogues were sometimes hollow men, more pre-occupied with their own vanity than the cause they affected to serve.

Chartism in Trowbridge did not disappear in 1842, but the record of its lively presence and dramatic influence begins to fade and the rich seam of primary evidence thins. The historiography confirms a decline, occasioned principally by the failure of the second petition: - ‘Chartism stood helpless when the combination of Whigs and Tories had

⁵³ ‘Trowbridge’ *Northern Star* June 4 1842 <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed June 5, 2023]

⁵⁴ ‘Mr F. O’Connor in Trowbridge’ *Northern Star* August 5, 1843 <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed June 4, 2023]

thrown out of Parliament the National Petition of 1842. The autocrat of Chartism had staked everything on a false move.’⁵⁵

There was a brief rallying in the wake of the plug riots of August when Trowbridge attempted to patch up its own quarrels in a typically altruistic attempt to assist those in crisis in the north and in doing so, to repair its own divisions.⁵⁶

The rest is – almost – silence. In 1844, a poignant advertisement appears in the commercial pages of the ‘Wiltshire Independent’. A certain Job Rawlings is named as the occupier of ‘Charter House’, one of two messuages being part of the ‘Democratic Chapel’, for sale by public auction; ‘all that convenient and roomy building ...some years since converted into a meeting house, including a committee and council rooms.’⁵⁷ This, surely, marks the end of an era?

Not quite. In Appendix 3 of his paper on the Trowbridge Chartists, Michael Lansdown lists fifty eight names of those who signed up, in 1847, as share-holders in O’Connor’s ill-fated land-scheme.⁵⁸ Principally ‘weavers’ and ‘clothworkers’, they hail from the heart of the town - ‘Back Street’, ‘Conigre’, ‘Halve’, ‘Mortimer Street’, ‘Timbrell Street’; those same streets named in innumerable newspaper reports and government correspondence as the locations for the extraordinary processions, meetings and fiery speeches of Chartism’s earlier, more exuberant incarnations.

⁵⁵ See Hovell, Chapter xvi

⁵⁶ See ‘Chartism’ *Wiltshire Independent* September 29, 1842
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed April 29, 2023]

⁵⁷ ‘For sale by auction’ *Wiltshire Independent* September 26, 1844
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed April 29, 2023]

⁵⁸ Michael Lansdown, *The Trowbridge Chartists* p.46

The Land Scheme was, of course, a lottery. Only a fraction of those named would have found their own personal arcadia in ‘O’Connorville’, far from the tribulations of the Trowbridge mills.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ See Alice Mary Hadfield, *The Chartist Land Company* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1970)

4 Conclusion

The narrative arc, that spans the history of the Trowbridge Chartists from those first tentative meetings in Bath in the summer of 1838, through the drama and spectacle of the mass rallies and onwards into the schisms and consolidations that book-ended the submission of the second petition, has focused on only a fraction of local Chartist history. Primary sources, which have been the mainstay of the study, have aligned themselves to produce an account, reliable only in the sense that it reflects some of the thoughts and actions of some of the participants in the Trowbridge story.

To anchor the narrative, an extensive historiography has helped, although that too, is large enough to have grown unmanageable, and has therefore been referenced in ways which, in retrospect, sometimes appear arbitrary. This is not simply the consequence of the pick and mix technique of the dilettante. From the outset, any consideration of the Chartist movement in the context of its derivation from, or articulation of social class, finds itself assailed, first of all by the contradictory voices of its own leadership, and then from a commentariat where Marx and Thompson, amongst dozens of others, appear to be fighting – or at least engaging in robust dialectic - in the captain's ivory tower.

This account's contribution to such discourse is unlikely to crack any moulds. Where it does diverge from at least some other studies is in its modest assertion of a consolidation of Chartism in Trowbridge in the wake of its repression at the hands of the authorities in late 1839/40. For some commentators, those defeats marked a

demoralisation from which the local movement never really recovered.¹ But from the evidence accumulated here, it is clear that the Chartists of Trowbridge were, if defeated by their humiliations in the marketplace at Devizes and consequently in the courts, then also changed – even, paradoxically, liberated - by them.

There was, obviously, a watershed, marked by the imprisonments of Roberts, Carrier, and Potts in the Spring of 1840. As a consequence, those mass gatherings, fuelled by an extraordinary cocktail of hope, anger and ceremony, that might have been imported directly from the Champs de Mars half a century before, declined in size and frequency. But on that side of the watershed, the dramatis personae of the movement are, for the most part, strangely elusive. Who were they? The named participants in those grand assemblies probably come to no more than ten. Of the thousands who brandished the torches and pikes, who painted the banners and wore the green sashes, who made the refreshments and cleared away the detritus of the meetings, large and small, we are left in woeful ignorance.

But, with the purchase of the Democratic Chapel, at precisely that time when the Trowbridge Chartists are deemed by some to be in terminal decline, a renaissance appears to be taking place which is echoed in some of the historiography. In their deliberations in the wake of the ‘New Move’ and the ‘Sturge amendment’, the voices seem more nuanced, more measured than those of either Carrier or Potts, and less equivocal than Vincent’s. It is here that we sense real echoes of Emma Griffin’s study of working-class autobiographies – itself a study in exceptionalism – revealing those characteristic pre-occupations with literacy and self-improvement.² It is here that we

¹ Poole, p.17

² Griffin, ‘The Making of the Chartists’

can sense the truth of Gareth Stedman Jones' assertion that 'the language of class was constructed... within a complex rhetoric of metaphorical association causal inference and imaginative construction.'³ It is here that we can see – and acknowledge - E.P. Thompson's passionate rejection of the 'economic Stalinism' of dogmatic Marxist analyses of class, in an attempt to define it as something more nuanced by human agency and culture.⁴

This cultural hinterland is palpable, and evidenced in many of the primary sources accessed in this study. Trowbridge Chartists attended Chartist meetings, reading groups and lectures. They could worship in Chartist churches, shop at Chartist stores and access Chartist literature directly and indirectly through the Chartist press. They could – and did, as we have seen, even name their children after prominent Chartist leaders.

It is hardly surprising, in the light of such a powerful hegemony, that Chartism can be seen as more than a mass campaign that ended in failure. If it failed to ameliorate the desperate conditions in which many of its local supporters lived and worked, it nevertheless laid down infrastructures upon which the political reforms of 1867 could be exploited by an increasingly literate and politically conscious working class.

In 'The Wiltshire Times' of August 11, 1877, there is a letter from 'An Old Chartist'. In it, the writer recalls the 'gone by days of Chartism in the town... when I had a hard tug to bear up from the opposite enemy.' In advocating the Charter, he adds, 'I lost my money, I lost my calling, many of my friends and reputation in the world. But having

³ Stedman Jones, 'The Language of Chartism' in *The Chartist Experience* ed. James Epstein and Dorothy Thompson (London: Macmillan, 1982) pp.11-58

⁴ Thompson, *Making* p.9

lived to see nearly the whole of the Charter the law of the land, I am highly pleased, and am happy to say I do not reflect upon what I lost by advocating the Charter of 1840.' He goes on to request the editor to reprint one of his pamphlets on 'Chartism in 1840' concluding that this will 'oblige an old Chartist in the 78th year of his age who, notwithstanding all the losses, crosses and oppositions... am still a Chartist and hope to live and die one...'⁵

From the details of the pamphlet and the dates – his initial submission of the pamphlet was corroborated by the editor of 'The Wiltshire Independent' in January 1840 - it is clear that 'the old Chartist' is Job Rawlings, obviously still bruised from his struggles within the movement, but still proud and still defiant.

In a footnote to the letter, the editor writes: - 'The pamphlet in question is written in a trenchant style... it would not be judicious to reproduce it, as it would only open up old sores which time and circumstances and improved legislation have healed.'⁶

'Old sores which time and circumstances and improved legislation have healed...'

A perfect footnote, perhaps, for the struggles, the sacrifices and the oblique successes of Job Rawlings and his earnest colleagues amongst the Trowbridge Chartists.

⁵ 'Correspondence – The Chartists *Wiltshire Times* August 11, 1877
<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>> [accessed Nov 15, 2023]

⁶ *Wiltshire Times* August 11, 1877

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