

## Timeline of events

**1789** - the start of the French Revolution

**1791** - publication of the "Rights of Man" by Thomas Paine

**1791** - the first Corresponding Society was set up in Sheffield

**1792** - the London Corresponding Society was established

**1795** - the Treason Act and the Seditious Meetings Act were passed

**1798** - the government introduced income tax to pay for the war

**1815** - the Napoleonic War ended

**1815** - the Corn Laws were passed with the aim of protecting British farmers from cheap foreign imports

## Important concept

In 1789 the French Revolution began. In Britain many people sympathised with the revolutionaries as they began to reform France. Radical groups in Britain demanded changes, such as the reform of parliament. However, following the execution of the French king Louis XVI in 1793 the ruling class in Britain became alarmed. The government declared war on France, a war which lasted, with one short break, until 1815. They also cracked down on Radicals in Britain in an attempt to stop the spread of revolutionary ideas.

*"How much the greatest event that has happened in the history of the world, and how much the best"*

Charles James Fox, the Whig leader, describing the French revolution in 1789.

## Key words

<b>radical</b>	a person advocating political and social reform
<b>universal male suffrage</b>	the right of all men to vote, whatever their class
<b>National Debt</b>	money borrowed by the government to fight the war
<b>demobilisation</b>	the release of men from the armed forces at the end of the war
<b>the Corn Laws</b>	laws passed in 1815 to protect British farmers from foreign competition
<b>rotten boroughs</b>	constituencies with a small number of voters, who could be controlled by the local landowner
<b>pocket borough</b>	a borough in which the choice of MP was controlled by one person



## The Corresponding Societies and their influence

Many ordinary people in Britain were inspired by the ideas of the French Revolution. Among them was **Thomas Paine**. In his book the "**Rights of Man**", he argued that **power lay with the people** and that every man had the right to vote. Radical ideas began to spread – **universal male suffrage, annual parliaments and abolition of rotten boroughs**.

In some towns working men formed **Corresponding Societies** to discuss radical ideas. The first was formed in Sheffield in 1791 and in 1792 the London Corresponding Society was formed.

However, **Paine's ideas alarmed the government**, which represented the wealthier citizens. The government passed a series of laws against the Radicals who wanted to reform Britain. In 1794 leading members of the London Corresponding Society were arrested and charged with treason (though they were later acquitted). The Treason Act and Seditious Meetings Act in 1795 made it difficult for Corresponding Societies to organise large meetings.

## The impact of war on the economy

The wars against the French lasted for over 20 years and had a huge impact on the economy.

**National Debt** – By the end of the war Britain had a debt of £861 million (almost £70 billion in today's money). The interest on this accounted for 80% of national income, so to pay off the debt, the government increased taxes.

**Income tax** was introduced in 1798 to pay for the war. It was very unpopular among the landed class who had the vote. In 1816, the year after the war ended, it was abolished.

**Other taxes** had to be introduced to replace income tax. **Duties** were put on products like tea, sugar, tobacco, beer and soap, which increased their cost for the poor.

**Rising prices** – prices of basic products like bread had risen steadily during the war.

**Unemployment** increased after 1815 as war production ended and **demobilised soldiers and sailors** returned home from war.

## The Corn Laws

During the war farmers benefitted from rising prices (as did the landowners who rented land to them). When the war ended **farmers were worried that cheap foreign corn would flood into Britain** and affect their livelihoods. The landed gentry in parliament shared this concern. In 1815 they passed the **Corn Laws**. These **banned imports of foreign corn** until the price of home-grown corn reached **80 shillings** a quarter (12.7 kg). This was meant to keep the price of corn high, to **protect farmers' and landowners' incomes**. However, this **increased the price of bread**, which hit the working class the most. The Corn Laws became a focus for working class discontent as they were seen as another example of parliament passing laws to benefit the wealthy at the expense of the poor.

## The demand for parliamentary reform

It is no surprise that the working classes, packed into the new industrial towns, were open to radical ideas. Two radical leaders, **Henry "Orator" Hunt** in his speeches and **William Cobbett**, in his weekly newspaper, the **Political Register**, led the demand for parliamentary reform as a way to improve the lives of working people.

The parliamentary system had remained unchanged for hundreds of years, and consequently had many faults:-

- **To vote** you had to be **male** and **own property**. This meant that very few men had the right (fewer than 3%).
- MPs were elected from two types of constituency. **Counties had two MPs**, regardless of size (one for Wales). The boroughs (towns) which sent MPs to parliament had not changed since the 1660s. This meant that Manchester, with a population of 182,000 in 1830, did not have an MP but "**rotten boroughs**" like Old Sarum (with only 3 houses), still had two MPs.
- Voting was public so **bribery and corruption were common**. This was especially the case in "**pocket boroughs**".