

Timeline of events

1811 - the Luddites attack and destroy machines in factories

1813 - 17 Luddites were executed

1816 - the Spa Fields Riots in London

1817 - the March of the Blanketeers from Lancashire

1829 - foundation of the Birmingham Political Union

1830 - the Whigs won the general election

1831 - the Reform Bill was introduced to parliament

1831 - Reform Bill riots in Bristol, Nottingham and other cities

Important concept

The period from the end of the Napoleonic War in 1815 to the passing of the Reform Act in 1832 was marked by a series of protests. With no vote, ordinary people felt that protest was the only way to make the government listen to their demands. However, Tory governments were opposed to the idea of reform and refused to make concessions. The situation only changed when the Whigs won power in 1830.

"Information has just been given in, that you are an owner of those detestable Shearing Frames... if they are not removed by the end of next week, I shall send 300 men to destroy them."
A letter signed by "General Ned Ludd" to a factory owner in Huddersfield.

Key words

the domestic system	the production of goods in the home, often involving the whole family
the factory system	the production of goods in factories, powered first by water wheels and later by steam engines
Luddites	hand loom weavers who smashed the machinery in factories that was putting them out of work
Spenceans	extreme radicals who advocated the use of violence to achieve their aims
political unions	organisations of middle and working class men who campaigned for parliamentary reform
Tory	the political party which favoured the status quo and generally opposed reform
Whig	the political party which favoured reform



Causes of the main forms of protest

In the late 18th and early 19th century the **British economy experienced rapid change**. For generations, under the old domestic system, **people had worked from their own homes** to produce goods, for example spinning and weaving textiles. However, **new inventions** together with the **introduction of steam power** meant it was more economical to make **goods in factories** to gain the benefits of mass production.

Many skilled workers found **themselves replaced by machinery** and, in retaliation, reacted violently. In Nottingham in 1811, skilled stocking makers called **Luddites** attacked factories and destroyed machinery that was putting them out of work. From Nottingham the riots spread to Yorkshire. In 1812 a mill owner, William Horsfall, was murdered by Luddites. The government cracked down and 17 Luddites were hanged for their part in the riots. After this things quietened down, but not before thousands of stocking frames had been destroyed.

The Spa Fields Riots (1816) and the March of the Blanketeers (1817)

The period 1816 to 1820 saw a series of major protests demanding changes to the political, economic and social systems.

The Spa Fields Riot 1816 – Henry Hunt, a leading radical, was due to speak at a meeting in Spa Fields, London, on the issue of reform of parliament. An estimated 20,000 people attended. However, a group of extreme radicals, called the Spenceans, broke away from the main meeting. They headed toward the Tower of London, looting a gun shop on the way. The leaders of the group were arrested and the rest dispersed.

The March of the Blanketeers 1817 – was a protest march intended to **highlight the plight of unemployed textile workers** from Lancashire. 5,000 protesters gathered at St Peter's Field Manchester with the aim of taking their petition to London. However, the authorities decided to act. The Riot Act was read and troops were sent in. Many protesters were arrested and **the march was broken up**.

The forming of political unions

During the 1820s the economy improved and the influence of the Radicals waned. The restrictions of the Six Acts (see the next page) were eased. However, **poor harvests from 1828-30** and an **economic depression** led to **higher food prices** and **increased unemployment**. By the **early 1830s** therefore there was **once again widespread protest** and the question of parliamentary reform was back on the agenda.

This time the campaign for parliamentary reform was led by **political unions** e.g. the Birmingham Political Union in 1829. They **used peaceful methods** such as public meetings and petitions to influence the government. The influence of these political unions was such that the government now had to take notice.

However, the political unions were not united. The middle classes were only concerned with winning the vote for their own class, while working class leaders like William Lovett and Henry Hetherington favoured a more radical policy of working class representation as well. Either way, by 1830 the cause of reform was being advanced in several newspapers and politicians were coming under increasing pressure to reform parliament to make it more representative.

The Reform Bill Riots (1832)

In **1830**, after almost 50 years of unbroken Tory government, the **Whigs won the general election**. The Whigs were **committed to parliamentary reform**, and in 1831 they introduced **the Great Reform Bill**. It passed through the House of Commons but was **rejected by the House of Lords**. This provoked **disturbances and riots across the country**. The most significant of these was in **Bristol**, where rioters took control of the city for two days with public buildings being stormed and set on fire. **Twelve people were killed, over a hundred wounded** and four were later executed for their part in the riot. Riots also occurred in places such as London, Derby, Bath and Nottingham. The riots were the culmination of over twenty years of agitation.