

Timeline of events

- 1817** – the suspension of habeas corpus
- 1819** – the Peterloo Massacre in St. Peter's Fields, Manchester
- 1819** – the government passed the Six Acts
- 1820** – the Cato Street Conspiracy
- 1830** – the Whigs won the general election
- 1832** – the Reform Act was passed

Important concept

Throughout this period the response of the government and authorities to the various protests was guided by a fear of revolution and the desire to suppress popular discontent. The end of the Napoleonic War in 1815 saw an increase in radical activity which alarmed the ruling classes and led them to take drastic action.

The use of agents provocateurs

Agent provocateurs were spies employed by the government to infiltrate radical groups and gather evidence about them. However, many also encouraged radicals to plan illegal acts, in order to report on them.

The government also **suspended the Habeas Corpus Act in 1817**. Habeas corpus is seen as a fundamental right and guarantees the right of every person to a trial before a court of law. The suspension highlighted the fear the government had of radicalism and possible revolution.

"At Waterloo it was man to man, but there it was downright murder"
Words spoken to his friend by William Lees, shortly before his death from a sabre wound three weeks after Peterloo. Lees had fought at the Battle of Waterloo.

Key words

agents provocateur	a government agent used to encourage others to break the law so that they may be arrested
habeas corpus	a right that guarantees an accused person a fair trial before a verdict is reached
Henry Hunt	a leading radical famous as a speaker
yeomanry	part-time, reserve soldiers who could be used in emergencies
the Six Acts	six laws introduced by the government to weaken the radical movement
sedition	actions or speech inciting people to rebel against the government
transportation	the punishment of sending prisoners to penal colonies in Australia
a parliamentary bill	the proposals for a new law, to be debated in both the House of Commons and the Lords
an act of parliament	the bill after it has been made into law by both houses of parliament

The Peterloo Massacre (1819)

In **1819** a crowd of 80,000 people assembled at **St. Peter's Fields in Manchester** to hear **Henry "Orator" Hunt** speak about parliamentary reform. However, the local magistrates were alarmed at the size of the crowd (in spite of the fact that it included women and children). They ordered the yeomanry to clear the crowd. Unfortunately, the **soldiers panicked and charged the crowd** with their sabres. **11 people were killed and 500 injured.**

There was public outrage and the event came to be known as "**Peterloo**", in mocking reference to the battle of Waterloo. The government, however, took a different view and congratulated the magistrates and yeomanry on their actions.

The Six Acts

The government response to Peterloo was to pass the **Six Acts** – or "**Gag**" Acts.

- **Training Prevention Act** – banned military style training or drilling liable to arrest and seven years transportation
- **Seizure of Arms Act** – this gave local magistrates power to search any property or person for weapons
- **Seditious Meetings Prevention Act** – banned the holding of public meetings of more than fifty people without the consent of a magistrate
- **Misdemeanours Act** – a measure that attempted to speed up trials
- **Blasphemous and Seditious Libels Act** – banned publications that criticized the government
- **Newspapers and Stamp Duties Act** – a tax on radical newspapers, making them more expensive and therefore reducing their circulation

The Cato Street Conspiracy

Peterloo angered extreme Spencean radicals, such as **Arthur Thistlewood**, who decided to take revenge against the government. Thistlewood rented a house in **Cato Street, London**. With others he organised a plot to assassinate the Cabinet at a dinner party and then seize power. However, the conspirators had been infiltrated by a government **agent provocateur**, George Edwards. Bow Street Runners were sent to storm their hideout and arrest the plotters. During the scuffle Thistlewood stabbed and killed one of the officers.

The trial of the conspirators caused a sensation. When it emerged that Edwards had suggested the idea of assassination to the conspirators, it was decided that he would not be a reliable witness and did not testify. However, two of the plotters informed on the others. **Thistlewood and four others were executed** and others transported. The Cato Street Conspiracy was the last attempt at revolt during this period. In the early 1820s the economy began to recover and discontent declined.

The 1832 Reform Act

In November 1830 the Tories lost the election. The **new Whig government introduced a Reform Bill**, which was twice defeated by the Tories in the House of Lords. It was only after the riots and, through the king's involvement, that **the Reform Act was passed in 1832.**

The **Great Reform Act** did bring some important changes.

- **Rotten boroughs were abolished** and new industrial towns were given MPs to represent them.
- In the **counties** the **40 shilling freeholder** kept the vote and in the **boroughs any man who occupied a house worth £10** in annual rent also received the vote.
- Therefore, **only the middle classes got the vote** i.e. just 1 in 5 men. Many working men were angered by what they saw as a betrayal. In the late 1830s many of them turned to Chartism as a way of achieving the vote.