Three new accounts of Peterloo: 3 Joseph Barrett

Joseph Barrett was a Newton Heath manufacturer who kept a warehouse in Market Street, Manchester, and he saw Peterloo from a vantage point close to that of the magistrates. Born around 1788 he was around thirty at the time. His account of Peterloo is part of a memoir of his life, written apparently in the mid-1830s. The early part deals mainly with the Luddism of 1812 and the activities of spies and radicals in Failsworth and Newton Heath; the spies tried to entrap people, including himself. He was related to the pioneer cotton spinner Samuel Crompton and married into the family of his colleague Jonathan Hobson.

The identification of Barrett as the author of the memoir is down to the research of Chris Westhead as part of the Peterloo Witness Project. The memoir reveals that he gave evidence at both the trial of Henry Hunt and others in York in 1820 and the Redford v. Birley action in 1822, which narrows the field down to six people. His position in the upper room of a house close behind the hustings with his brother and a Mr Hobson identifies him as Joseph Barrett. With his brother Thomas and his friend Jonathan Hobson he watched from the second floor of the house next to the Windmill public house, near Buxton’s house where the magistrates sat, some thirty yards behind the speakers’ platform. Both Barrett and Hobson gave evidence that the demonstrators had been entirely peaceful and orderly until after they were attacked.

Barrett’s memoir is written in an exercise book, with additions here and there which have been placed in the order he seems to have intended. His spelling is imperfect and occasionally phonetic and he has a habit of missing out words; corrections and omissions have been supplied in square brackets. It seems to have been an effort to recall and write. Some fifteen years after Peterloo, Barrett’s memory is hazy on the exact order of events; his recollection that the speakers had been peacefully arrested before the attack by the Yeomanry does not match any of the other eye-witness accounts. But his recall of individual incidents and conversations seems clear and vivid, and there is no reason to doubt his account of the episodes which left such a powerful impression on his mind.

I am now come to give an account of the Manchester Massacre, or Peter Loo affair, as it was often called because it took place in St Peters Square.

It was on the 16 August 1819 that a meeting was announced to take place of Reformers at that place.

A few days before Mr Jonathan Hobson, a merchant in that place, & he came to my brothers house, and asked if my eldest brother would obtain a room where it could be seen. My brother said he would try to do so, & fortunately he met with a gentleman that had an untenanted house nearly opposite to where the platform for the speakers was to be placed, & he gave my brother the key of it, & my brother brought it home, and gave it to Mr Hobson. Mr Hobson got some refreshments taken to an upper room in the house, & on the morning of the meeting Mr Hobson, myself & eldest brother were together. We saw the people arrive, among whom were many young women, dressed in white. There were persons from all the neighbouring towns and villages, with flags and bands of music, & persons with long white rods, who seemed to be the directors of each separate procession, but no weapons of any [kind] not even walking sticks, for they had been left in some house before the men entered Manchester lest it might be thought they were weapons.

The people continued to arrive until the square was filled, & there were calculated to be 80,000 & they [were] all quite peacable and orderly. We were in one of the best positions to see the whole of the meeting, & all the proceedings.

The speakers came about one o’clock on to the Platform & were about to address the meeting, when the Manchester Yeomanry began to come towards the Platform, headed by Meager a drill sergeant to Captain Withington, whom we knew, as he had often sold us yarn.

The Yeomanry looked very pale & frightened, except Captain Withington, who was – . The speakers were taken off the platform, & the people remained quiet. It was said that the riot act was read, but if so, no one seemed to know. It was said afterwards it had been read from a chamber window at some distance. After the speakers had been removed, the people began to go away, and then the Yeomanry got courage, and began to strike the people, but no [Resistance?] was mad[e]. The confusion, and panic became general, & we continued at the window to watch the proceedings of the Yeomanry, but soon a soldier or two pointed a musket, & said that they would shoot us, unless we shut the window & went from it.

After some time we return[ed] when the Yeomanry were not to be seen, but the appearance of the square was such as it is impossible to give an adequate idea; there were heaps of people lying, who seemed dead, but had got into this state, by being stuck & frightened, though a many of them were wounded. All over the place there were Flags & several instruments lying. There were only two persons killed on the field, one was John Lees, whose father we knew, as he had supplied us with cotton weft, & he lived at Oldham. The other was a special constable from the Bulls Head in Manchester. There were about three hundred stationed under the house where we were, & the Manchester & Cheshire Yeomanry were so drunk & excited that they did not know what they were doing. One thing I must mention that while the people were lying as I have stated, one of the Cathedral Ministers high in office, kept walking about in the field, & seemed highly pleased with the seen [sic], for he strutted about like a cock that had beaten his opponent.

The Yeomanry after this brilient victory went completely mad; the[y] made about the streets of Manchester striking at every person, that was in their way, and even went to one Cotton Mill, & wished to strike the people that were coming out, & hacked at the doors to make them come out. Myself and brother returned home very much astonished, & [amazed?] at the proceedings. After we got home persons who had been to the meeting began to pass our house, & to them that were wounded my brother Thomas gave money.

The Yeomanry went about the streets of Manchester in the mad[d]ist manner.

The morning after an ultra Tory came into our Warehouse, & my brother said to him: ‘You made sad work with the people yesterday.’ He replied, ‘We could do it better, if [we] had to do it again.’ My brother said, ‘How would you do it better?’ He answered, ‘by stopping up the end of the streets leading from the meeting, & planting cannon, & killing ever[y] devil of them.’ My brother then said: What would you do for workmen, after that?’ He made no reply. There were about 80,000 persons assembled at the meeting.

We had supplied the Colledge, & the Infirmary with Bed Ticking for some time, & the buyer for the Infirmary came in one day about a week before the Meeting & said, You have a large pile of Gray Ticks there, send them to the Infirmary. We did so, but my brother was surprised at this offhand order. We learned after that the Ticking were made up into beds in readiness for the wounded at Peterloo.

This circumstance has not been related often before & I do it now to shew the extreme madness & ??? of the Tories at this time.