

Bishop Stanley's Account of Peterloo

Soon after one o'clock on the 16th of August, I went to call on Mr. Buxton, with whom I had some private business. I was directed to his house overlooking St. Peter's field, where I unexpectedly found the magistrates assembled.¹ I went up to their room, and remained there seven or eight minutes. Hunt was not then arrived; a murmur running through the crowd prepared us for his approach; a numerous vanguard preceded him, and in a few moments the Barouche appeared in which he sat with his coadjutors, male and female.

A tremendous shout instantly welcomed him; he proceeded slowly towards the hustings. On approaching the knot of constables the carriage stopped a short time, I conceive from the difficulty of making way through a band of men who were little inclined to fall back for his admission. The Barouche at length attained its position close to the hustings, and the speakers stepped forth, the female—as far as I can recollect—still remaining on the driver's seat with a banner in her hand. I then left the magistrates and went to a room immediately above them, commanding a bird's-eye view of the whole area, in which every movement and every object was distinctly visible.

In the centre were the hustings surrounded *to all appearance*² by a numerous body of constables, easily distinguished by their respectable dress, staves of office, and hats on; the elevation of the hustings of course eclipsed a portion of the space immediately beyond them, so as to prevent my seeing, and consequently asserting positively, whether, they were completely surrounded by this chain of constables. The chain from this its main body was continued in a double line, two or three deep, forming an avenue to Mr. Buxton's house, by which there seemed to be free and uninterrupted access to and from the hustings. Had any interruption of their communication occurred previous to the change, I think I must have perceived it from the commanding position I occupied. A vast concourse of people, in a close and compact mass, surrounded the hustings and constables, pressing upon each other apparently with a view to be as near the speakers as possible. They were, generally speaking, bare-headed, probably for the purpose of giving those behind them a better view. Between the outside of this mob and the sides of , the area the space was comparatively

¹ I met Mr. Buxton on the steps of his house, not at all aware till then that his residence was at or near the place of meeting. I had been directed to his shop, considerably beyond the square, to which I was proceeding. I state this to prove that what I afterwards saw was purely accidental, and that I had no previous intention of witnessing in detail the transactions of the day. As I came from the bottom of Alport Street, on the Altrincham side of Manchester, my original directions were indeed to pass through St. Peter's field as the shortest line, but I had taken a circuitous route to avoid the meeting, which led me to the corner of it near Mr. Buxton's house.

² It has been stated, upon evidence which I should be unwilling to discredit, that the body of persons more immediately in contact with the hustings were of Hunt's party. My reasons for believing them at the time to be (as I was told) special constables, were because they resembled them in appearance, were connected in their lines, had their hats on, and staves of office occasionally appeared amongst them. Mr. Hay, in his official letter, says: "A body of special constables took their ground, about two hundred in number, close to the hustings, from whence there was a line of communication to the house where we were." This is precisely my view of the case; doubtless, had the communication been cut, he would have noticed it.

unoccupied; stragglers were indeed numerous, but not so as to amount to anything like a crowd, or to create interruption to foot passengers. Round the edges of the square more compact masses of people were assembled, the greater part of whom appeared to be spectators. The radical banners and caps of liberty were conspicuous in different parts of the concentrated mob, stationed according to the order in which the respective bands to which they belonged had entered the ground, and taken up their positions. After the orators had ascended the hustings, a few minutes were taken up in preparing for the business of the day, and then Hunt began his address.

I could distinctly hear his voice, but was too distant to distinguish his words. He had not spoken above a minute or two before I heard a report in the room that the cavalry were sent for; the messengers, we were told, might be seen from a back window. I ran to that window from which I could see the road leading to a timber yard (I believe) at no great distance, where, as I entered the town, I had observed the Manchester Yeomanry stationed. I saw three horsemen ride off, one towards the timber yard, the others in the direction which I knew led to the cantonments of other cavalry. I immediately returned to the front window, anxiously awaiting the result; a slight commotion among a body of spectators, chiefly women, who occupied a mound of raised, broken ground on the left, and to the rear, of the orators, convinced me they saw something which excited their fears; many jumped down, and they soon dispersed more, rapidly. By this time the alarm was quickly spreading, and I heard several voices exclaiming: "The soldiers! the soldiers!"; another moment brought the cavalry into the field on a gallop,³ which they continued till the word was given for halting them, about the middle of the space which I before noticed as partially occupied by stragglers.

They halted in great disorder, and so continued for the few minutes they remained on that spot. This disorder was attributed by several persons I in the room to the undisciplined state of their horses, little accustomed to act together, and probably frightened by the shout of the populace, which greeted their arrival. Hunt had evidently seen their approach; his hand had been pointed towards them and it was clear from his gestures that he was addressing the mob respecting their interference. His words, whatever they were, excited a shout from those immediately about him, which was re-echoed with fearful animation by the rest of the multitude. Ere that had subsided, the cavalry, the loyal spectators, and the special constables, cheered loudly in return, and a pause ensued of about a minute or two. An officer and some few others then advanced rather in front of the troop, formed, as I before said, in much disorder and with scarcely the semblance of line, their sabres glistened in the air, and on they went, direct for the hustings. At first, i.e., for a very few paces, their movement was not rapid, and there was some show of an attempt to follow their officer in regular succession, five or six abreast; but, as Mr. Francis Phillips in his pamphlet observes, they

³ Some, by being better mounted or rather in advance, might have been more moderate in their pace, but generally speaking it was very rapid, and I use the word gallop, as conveying the best idea of their approach.

soon "increased ' their speed, and with a zeal and ardour which might naturally be expected from men acting with delegated power against a foe by whom it is understood they had long been insulted with taunts of cowardice, continued their course, seeming. individually to vie with each other which should be first. Some stragglers, I have remarked, occupied the space in which they halted. On the commencement of the charge, these fled in all directions; and I presume escaped, with the exception of a woman who had been standing ten or twelve yards in front ; as the troop passed her body was left, to all appearance lifeless; and there remained till the close of the business, when, as it was no great distance from the house, I went towards her. Two men were then in the act of raising her up; whether she was actually dead or not I cannot say, but no symptoms of life were visible at the time I last saw her. ⁴

As the cavalry approached the dense mass of people they used their utmost efforts to escape: but so closely were they pressed in opposite directions by the soldiers, the special constables, the position of the hustings, and their own immense numbers, that immediate escape was impossible. The rapid course of the troop was of course impeded when it came in contact with the mob, but a passage was forced in less than a minute, so rapid indeed was it that the guard of constables close to the hustings shared the fate of the rest. The whole of this will be intelligible at once by a reference to the annexed sketch. .On their arrival at the hustings a scene of dreadful confusion ensued. The orators fell or were forced off the scaffold in quick succession; fortunately for -them, the stage being rather elevated, they were in great degree beyond the reach of the many swords which gleamed around them. Hunt fell—or threw himself—among the constables, and was driven or dragged, as fast as possible, down the avenue which communicated with the magistrates' house; his associates were hurried after him in a similar manner. By this time so much dust had arisen that no accurate account can be given of what further took place, at that particular spot. The square was now covered with the flying multitude; though still in parts the banners and caps of liberty were surrounded by groups. The Manchester Yeomanry had already taken possession of the hustings, when the Cheshire Yeomanry entered on my left in excellent order, and formed in the rear of the hustings as well as could be expected, considering the crowds who were now pressing in all directions and filling up the space hitherto partially occupied. The Fifteenth Dragoons appeared nearly at the same moment, and paused rather than halted on our left, parallel to the row of houses. They then pressed forward, crossing the avenue of constables, which opened to let them through, and bent their course towards the Manchester Yeomanry.

The people were now in a state of utter rout and confusion, leaving the ground strewn with hats and shoes, and hundreds were thrown down in the attempt to escape. The cavalry were hurrying about in all directions, completing the work of dispersion, which—to use the words given in Wheeler's Manchester Chronicle referred to by Mr. Francis Phillips—was effected in so short a space of time as to appear as if done “by magic.” I saw nothing that gave me an idea of resistance, except in one or two spots where they showed some disinclination to abandon the banners; these impulses, however, were but momentary, and banner

⁴ I am particular in mentioning these minute circumstances, because in this and some other points in which I could not be mistaken, I have been strongly contradicted.

after banner fell into the hands of the, military power. The extent of their defence may perhaps best be estimated by the gallant conduct, which I particularly noticed, of a man on horseback, apparently a gentleman's servant. Unarmed as far as I could perceive, he separated from the cavalry, and rode directly into a compact body of people collected round a banner; a scuffle ensued highly interesting; the banner rose and fell repeatedly, but ultimately fell into his hands, and he galloped off with it in triumph. During the whole of this confusion, heightened at its close by the rattle of some artillery crossing, it has been often asked when and where the cavalry struck the people. I can only say that from the moment they began to force their way through the crowd towards the hustings swords were up and swords were down, but whether they fell with the sharp or flat side, of course I cannot pretend to give an opinion.

On quitting the ground I for the first time observed that strong bodies of infantry were posted in the streets, on opposite sides of the square; their appearance might probably have increased the alarm and the square, shrieks were heard in all directions, and as the crowd of people dispersed the effects of the conflict became visible. Some were seen bleeding on the ground and unable to rise; others, less seriously injured but faint with the loss of blood, were retiring slowly or leaning upon others for support. One special constable, with a cut down his head, was brought to Mr. Buxton's house. I saw several others in the passage, congratulating themselves on their narrow escape, and showing the marks of sabre-cuts on their hats. I saw no firearms, but distinctly heard four or five shots, towards the close of the business, on the opposite side of the square, beyond the hustings; but nobody could inform me by whom they were fired.⁵

The whole of this extraordinary scene was the work of a few minutes. The rapid succession of so many important incidents in this short space of time, the peculiar character of each depending so much on the variation of a few instants in the detail, sufficiently accounts for the very contradictory statements that have been given; added to which it should be observed that no spectator on the ground could possibly form a just and correct idea of what was passing. When below, I could not have observed anything accurately beyond a few yards around me, and it was only by ascending to the upper rooms of Mr. Buxton's house that I could form a just and correct idea of almost every point which has since afforded so much discussion and contention. The cavalry were now collected in different parts of the area; the centre, but a few minutes before crowded to excess, was utterly deserted; groups of radicals were still seen assembled on the outskirts, screening themselves behind logs of timber or mingling with the spectators on the pavement.

The constables remained in a body in front of the house waiting for the reappearance of Hunt, who (with his colleagues) was secured in a small parlour opening into the passage to which I had now descended. I believe the original intention was to send him to the New Bailey in a carriage, but it was soon after decided that he should walk. When this was made known it was received with shouts of approbation and "bring him

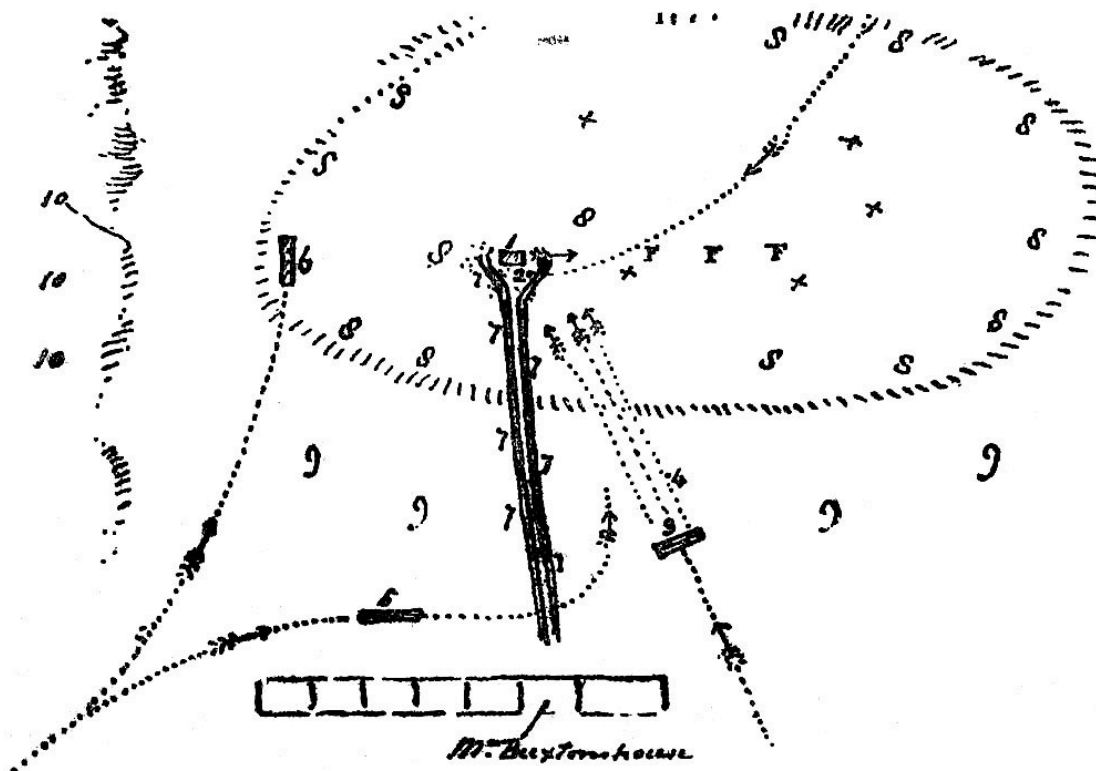
⁵ It would certainly have impeded the progress of a mob wishing to retreat in either of those directions. When I saw them they were resting on their arms, and I believe they remained stationary, taking no part in the transaction.

out, let the rebel walk," was heard from all quarters. At length he came forth, and notwithstanding the blows he had received in running the gauntlet down the avenue of constables, I thought I could perceive a smile of triumph on his countenance. A person (Nadin, I believe) offered to take his arm, but he drew himself back, and in a sort of whisper said: "No, no, that's rather too good a thing," or words to that effect. He then left the house, and I soon afterwards also went away.

I saw no symptoms of riot or disturbances before the meeting; the impression on my mind was that the people were sullenly peaceful, and I had an excellent opportunity of forming an opinion by suddenly coming in contact with a large body from Ashton, who met me in Mosley Street, as I entered the town." They were walking at a moderate pace, six or seven abreast, arm in arm, which enabled them to keep some sort of regularity in their march. I was soon surrounded by them as I passed, and though my horse showed a good deal of alarm, particularly at their band and flags, they broke rank and offered no molestation whatever. On entering Mosley Street at 12 o'clock I stopped to question some persons on the footway respecting the proceedings of the day. When about to proceed, I was recommended to move from the middle of the street to the path, as the mob were advancing. I declined, suspecting my advisers might be radicals, adding: "I am on the King's highway, and shall remain where I am." I mention this because I have heard it reported that I was insulted by the Ashton people, which may have originated from the above account. As soon, however, as I had quitted Mr. Buxton's house at the conclusion of the business, I found them in a very different state of feeling. I heard repeated vows of revenge. "You took us unprepared, we were unarmed to-day, and it is your day; but when we meet again the day shall be ours."

How far this declaration of being unarmed men may be relied upon, I cannot pretend to say; I certainly saw nothing like arms either at or before the meeting; their sticks were, as far as came under my observation, common walking-sticks; that some, however, were armed I can have no doubt, as a constable, when I was leaving Mr. Buxton's house, showed me a couple of short skewers or daggers fixed in wooden handles, which he had taken in the fray. I have heard from the most respectable authority that the cavalry were assailed by stones during the short time they halted previous to their charge. I do not wish to contradict positive assertions. What a person sees must be true. My evidence on that point can only be negative. I certainly saw nothing of the sort, and yet my eyes were fixed most steadily upon them, and I think that I must have seen any stone larger than a pebble at the short distance at which I stood (from thirty to fifty yards) and the commanding view I had. I indeed saw no missile weapons used throughout the whole transaction, but as I have before stated, the dust at the hustings soon partially obscured everything that took place near that particular spot ; but no doubt the people defended themselves to the best of their power, as it was absolutely impossible for them to get away and give the cavalry a clear passage till the outer part of the mob had fallen back. No blame can be fairly attributed to the soldiers for wounding the constables as well as the radicals, since the chief distinguishing mark (the former being covered and the latter uncovered) soon ceased to exist; every man for obvious reasons covering himself in haste the moment the dispersion commenced. Such are the leading features of this event, to which I can speak positively; comments and

opinions I have avoided as much as possible, my object being to give a clear and impartial account of facts, which whether for or against the adopted conclusions of either party must speak for themselves.



Stanley's notes attached to his plan

1. The hustings. The arrow shows the direction in which the orators addressed the mob, the great majority being in front: F, F, F.
2. The Barouche in which Hunt arrived, the line from it showing its entrance and approach.
3. The spot on which the Manchester Yeomanry Cavalry halted previous to their charge; the dotted lines in front showing the direction of their charge on attacking the hustings.
4. On this spot the woman alluded to in the account ([p. 15](#)) was wounded and remained apparently dead, till removed at the conclusion of the business.
5. Here the 15th Dragoons paused for a few moments before they proceeded in the direction marked by the dotted line.
6. The Cheshire Cavalry; my attention was so much taken up with the proceedings of the Manchester Yeomanry Cavalry, etc., and the dispersion in front of the hustings, that I cannot speak accurately as to their subsequent movements.
- 7, 7, 7. The band of special constables, *apparently* surrounding the hustings.
- 8, 8, 8. The mob in dense mass; their banners displayed in different parts, as at x, x.
- 9, 9, 9. A space comparatively vacant; partially occupied by stragglers; the mob condensing near the hustings for the purpose of seeing and hearing.
- 10, 10, 10. Raised ground on which many spectators had taken a position; a commotion amongst them first announced the approach of the cavalry; their elevated situation commanding a more extensive view.



Never having seen St. Peter's fields before or since, I cannot pretend to speak accurately as to distance, etc. I should, at a guess, state the distance from the hustings to Mr. Buxton's house to be about a hundred yards, which may serve as a general scale to the rest of the plan.

From D. A. Bruton, *Three Accounts of Peterloo* (1919)

See also Stanley's evidence in the Redford v Birley Trial 1822, day 2.