

Three new accounts of Peterloo

1. George Swift

George Swift was one of the least-known of the ten Peterloo defendants tried at York. He was described then as a Manchester shoemaker, yet he talks here of having journeyed into his native county for the meeting. Swift was on the hustings for Hunt's speech and was probably arrested for his actions before the start of the meeting, when he was seen to address part of the crowd from the platform and to get those around it to link arms – an action which Hulton and the other magistrates took to be a sign of aggressive intent. He defended himself at York and was acquitted. On the fourth day of the trial he told the court:

My situation in life has given me little opportunity of becoming acquainted with the rules of a Court of *Justice* ... I positively affirm, I had no concern in erecting the hustings whatever; neither should I have been upon the hustings at all, had it not been from what observed in the conduct of the constables, I that was very apprehensive they might excite some to acts of violence—therefore, I determined to do my utmost to induct the people to give them no pretext. I have been but a short time in Manchester, but long enough to learn the general character of the Police Officers. When I was but a child, I volunteered my service in my country's defence ... and I consider I am no longer worthy to live, than whilst I retain the character of a worthy Briton ... I defy any one to prove that I had any connection with any of the Defendants. I never saw any of them, with the exception of Mr. Hunt until we were confined together, and he never saw me in his life before to his knowledge.

Although dated 16 August the letter seems to have been written up over several days while Swift was in the New Bailey prison awaiting examination. The first hearing took place on 20 August and the charge of High Treason mentioned by Swift had been dropped by the final hearing on 27th. His account is cast in the form of a letter intended for publication, and was probably modelled on Henry Hunt's open letters to the Lancashire reformers.

Swift's manuscript account is in Manchester Central Library, MSC 920, with a copy at BR 942 730731 P92. His handwriting is strong and clear and his English good. It was transcribed as part of the Peterloo Witness Project by Chris Westhead.

Manchester, August 16th 1819

Dear Brothers,

You will in the course of a few hours hear of the abominable proceedings and the unexpected result of this day. A more shameful attempt to support an aristocracy never was heard of – nor could anything more cruel have been contemplated to support the most absolute tyrant or to crush at one blow a faithful and loyal people. To stop the mouths and deafen the cries of an oppressed nation. To add new burdens on the already overloaded shoulders of the middle and working classes. To sacrifice the interest the liberty and life of nine tenths of [the] community to support in the vilest profligacy of the other one tenth. Oh how shocked will be the inhabitants of every town in the empire when they hear this is done with the edge of the sabre and the point of the bayonet with the loss of scores of our fellow creatures lives and the blood and limbs of hundreds more. As the painful news will reach you long before anything I can send you, I will commence making memorandums and will transmit them to you as brief and early as I possibly can. My last letter informed you of my journey into my native county and this will inform you of my living in a Dungeon six feet by seven, under no less a charge than that of High Treason awaiting the opinion of the Crown Officers on the probability of a conviction on the adduced evidence. On my arrival at Manchester I was informed the public meeting had been postponed to 16 of August from reasons assigned by a Mr Raincock of Liverpool. The

circumstance is mentioned by that base hireling the Editor of the Manchester Chronicle in the following words,

Our readers are well aware that a meeting of the Radical Reformers was appointed to take place near St Peter's Church in the town on Monday next. The probable occurrence of such a meeting had engaged the serious attention of the Right Hon the Earl of Derby, the active and vigilant Lord Lieutenant of the County of the Magistrates, the Boroughreeve, the Constables and the whole of the civil authorities.

Government had also not been inactive in its contemplation but had directed to the Town and neighbourhood of Manchester and Salford a formidable force of Artillery, Cavalry and Infantry under the superintendence of General Sir John Byng, military commander of the District, and Sir John had regulated in person a proper distribution of this extensive armament. A very great addition to the civil power had also been provided by swearing in extra constables and on Saturday last nine Magistrates acting for the counties palatine of Lancaster and Chester issued a public notice dated from the New Bailey Courthouse, cautioning all persons to abstain at their peril attending the illegal meeting convened for Monday the 9th of August. So this succeeded the admirable proclamation of his Royal Highness the Prince Regent declaring the various objects of mischief which the country had to apprehend and His Royal determination to repress the practices once merated [merited]. The Reformers now thought it high time to betake themselves to consideration and one of their notorious chiefs whose name is Saxton was commissioned to apply to that eminent Counsel Mr Raincock for an opinion on the legality of their notice for their intended meeting and his answer was that the intention of choosing Representatives contrary to the existing law tends greatly to render the proposed meeting seditious under those circumstances it would be deemed justifiable in the Magistrates to prevent such meeting. Saxton announced this in a very inflammatory [sic] printed bill in which he throws doubt upon the legal conclusion of Mr Raincock but says, he (Saxton) is induced to recommend the Requisitionists to pause merely in consideration of the cruel threats of violence issued in a paper from the Bench of Magistrates and because in a question of Right they, the Requisitionists are not prepared to defend themselves, but recomend [sic] St Peters area as the place and Monday the 16th of August as the day for a meeting to consider the propriety of adopting the most legal means of obtaining a Reform in the commons house of Parliament. So far so good Mr Wheeler of the Chronicle. Mr Hunt having been invited to take the Chair, he arrived at the Bullock Smithy near Stockport on the 8th and came to Manchester on the 9th of August attended by thousands of people. They made a stand at the end of Blakeley Street where Mr Hunt animadverted very strongly on those who caused the postponement of the meeting, describing Mr Raincock as a pettifogger and nine Magistrates as nine Tailors. He then proceeded in company of Sir Chas Wollesley [sic], Mr Moorhouse of Stockport and Mr Johnson to Smedley Cottage, the country seat of the latter Gentleman where he remained the following week, having promised to preside on the 16th. The

authorities was so much agitated as to induce a observer to think the most serious revolt might be expected from a meeting to petition the legislature to remove certain grievances, the existence of which all agree but vary in the mode of removing them. The Magistrates describing the meeting for the 16th seditious if not treasonable and assured the public that every person composing the meeting would be provided with firearms. This proclamation was contradicted by Mr Hunt in a most Gentleman like manner he assured no-one would come there with any other weapon than a self-approving conscience. This had a powerful effect in more ways than one. He invited the Magistrates and minor authorities, and if not inclined to take an active part in the business of the day use their influence and keep the peace. 'I need not say what will men do for money.' So those men has done all they ought not to have done and left undone all they ought to have done. That talent they are endowed with has been most grossly misapplied. Mischief has been their object all through and to carry their point the press forever in some part has not rendered them a trifling assistance. I have now before me a paragraph of Wheeler of the Chronicle in alluding to Mr Hunt, he says,

'To say the best we can of this popular Democrat is, that he is a profane irreligious libertine, a penurious, proud, revengeful Coward, capable and accustomed to insult his inferiors to defraud his servants and tenants defraud his Creditors and prostitute his public faith for protection. Now only observe if a man should be capable of all this where shall we find a human being that may be said to be his inferior'

but I must proceed with facts and not surmises.

I was walking up Market Street with Saxton on Sunday morning. Let us said he go to the Union School and prevent the women going tomorrow for it will be a bloody day, every yeoman's sword is ground on purpose. I would not go and I mention this here as an introduction to other matters for I do apprehend that Mr Saxton knew more than he dare tell me of at that time. However the Monday morning arrived and I went to the different Barracks (for there were several places fitted up as temporary barracks) to ascertain the orders of the Military, but nothing could I illicit that appeared of importance. I went to the meeting about quarter to twelve o'clock and found they had not finished the hustings. I found fault with a joiner who had undertook the work, for the numbers increased so fast that I apprehended they would not get their work done, the pressure became so great. At this time I got upon the wood already erected and caused to be formed a ring of about thirty yards diameter and to maintain their position in spite of the pressure. I requested they would link Arms six or eight deep all around and place a flag at the only place where an opening was to be made. Some people came to me and advised I would strive to allay the fears of some that was exited [sic] by the arrival of the posse of special Constables, who have but just then formed a line extending from the hustings. I stop'd on the top of the now finished temporary Rostrom [sic] with feelings bordering on

contempt for the busy fools and on pity for those who feared them, and dispensed with the subject in as few words as I possibly could, but short as they are, they, and the instructions given in forming the before mentioned circle, are the paltry grounds of the evidence that detained me on a charge of so high a nature, that Death is the inevitable consequence of conviction. Mr Hunt arrived about ten minutes after One o'clock in a coach accompanied by Mr Johnson, Mr Knight and others. Mr Johnson proposed Mr Hunt do take the Chair. This was carried unanimously. The Hustings was formed of deal planks with vacancies so that all but the speaker might be seated. I sat betwixt Saxton and Edward Baines Junior of Leeds. At this moment the sight was beautiful. Mr Hunt now rose to address this immense mass of human beings who after the accustomed salute stood motionless and in breathless silence. Here then commenced the oration that is to end – where? – with its consequences I know not. Speaking of the postponement being generally known he had only to say that it had caused double the number to attend. Alluding to the resolutions formed for the consideration of the meeting and now in the act of pulling a paper out of his pocket the Yeomen cavalry made their appearance at the top of the ground. At this moment a very apparent sensation pervaded the whole assembly so sudden an appearance of Military without the least warning in word or deed induced me to think they was come to intimidate all they could and not to act from authority, for not a word had been spoken on that field to the public by anyone in authority – civil or military. Mr Hunt now set himself off to advantage, he had 130 thousand people under command, he gave signal for a general cheer and ordered the people to stand fast. If they want me said Mr Hunt let me go – don't resist, stand fast; don't resist, pointing to a near him if them fellows won't be quiet put them down and keep them down and again exerted himself as a Masterpiece [sic] in managing a public assembly. The Cavalry formed in front of a range of buildings at the top of the area. After a pause of about two minutes they dashed forward towards us as well as they could, closing in as they got faster into the crowd. Their swords was lifted up and struck down all the way but I could not at that instance see whether they cut anyone or not. They was a considerable time getting through the dense crowd considering the distance so short. They came to the cordon or well of men round the Hustings but no resistance was made to their progress there more than at any other place. The inside of this circle we had filled with Woemen [sic] from the Union Schools, music and flags. The Cavalry surrounded the Hustings and made a full stand for the space of one minute and then turned round to the unoffending multitude most of which near them was women and Bus[hen-coves? Butcher?] and in the most confused brutal undisciplined [sic] manner rode circuitously about the Hustings chopping [sic] down all before them. The confusion and bloodshed now became so general that I cannot describe anywhere but just around the place I stood. The Hustings was about eight feet high. I stood up when the Cavalry surrounded us and during the moment they stood still I anxiously looked for some of the Magistrates in execution of some legal document but guess my surprise when the Cavalry turned round and no-one appeared with a specific charge. They cut at our legs and but for dextrously leaping backwards I must have lost a foot that fellows sword entered the plank on which I stood two inches

in a sloping direction. There was scores of those special constables amongst the Horse Soldiers who appeared to share of the fury of the Soldiers same as those who were not of their party, those fellows had staves or Bludgeons with which they struck everyone they come near who had not one of the same sort but when the horses came round they paid no respect to a truncheon but down they went amongst [sic] others and the Cavalry cut at them indiscriminately. I saw several of those fellows showing their staves and begging [sic] them to observe they were constables. Not so they slashed amongst them and they squealed out like young brisk Pigs, there was no way for those to get away from the ground as every street end was blocked by Infantry with the power of the Bayonet. I called to those constables to take me in custody and was getting off the Hustings to them but the cavalry come on so rapidly that I got up again. I took the immediate advantage and got hold of two of those constables but before I had time to say "Jack Robinson" I had lost the fellows and was under the Horses amongst thousands. I took hold of a young woman at this time that was bleeding very much and nearly senseless. I dragged her somewhere and a woman in the place washed her. She told us where she came from and I took her home. I said to her Mother, here is your Daughter, I will call presently. I had left the door perhaps one hundred yards when a Mr Edge took my Arm and as we was going towards St Peters area we met Mr Hunt Mr Johnson and others under an escort of light Dragoons and Constables going to the New Bailey. The Constables surrounded me and amongst them to Prison I went. On our arrival we were called our names which were Henry Hunt, Jos[ep]h Johnson, John Thacker Saxton, George Swift, Robert Wilde, J^{no} Jones, W^m [sic] Tyas and a young woman. We were all put in one yard at ten minutes past two o'clock. On examining Saxton [sic] clothes we found one of the Yeoman had cut his coat laps off, through the wilt that covers the Pocket, through the pocket into his trowsers and entered his thigh an inch and a half. The sword that cut it must have been as sharp as a Razor [sic] or it could not have cut it so clean. Mr Saxton here had good proof of the truth of his assertion made to me in Market Street last Sunday morning. Mr Hunt could not lift his left arm to his head he was so abused with the Constables Staves. Mr W^m [sic] Tyas who is a reporter for the London Times wrote to the Magistrates for his liberation that he might haste to town with his notes but he was detained untill his report was too late for insertion. This man has given such a strict and true account of this day's proceedings as I am afraid the Editor will not allow to appear in its original form; this man has since admitted his report was materially softened down respecting the Yeomanry.

During this afternoon they brought in Mr James Moorhouse who had been taken into custody at the Flying Horse, the office where his Stage Coaches stops at, a lolly [sic] old man he is, there is something in this person which I am told commands the respect of all good men. I will obtain further knowledge of him and them. Mr Hunt and Mr Saxton who is the manager of the Manchester Observer was busy examining Mr Tyas reports and preparing them for the compositor expecting his liberation, but not so all. At 10 Minutes to 6 to o'clock we called and put [account unfinished]