

Petition of Henry Hunt, of Middleton Cottage

House of Commons, Votes and Proceedings, 29 - 30 November 1819

Transcribed by Lauren Jaye Gradwell

(No.4)

A Petition of *Henry Hunt, of Middleton Cottage*, in the County of *Hants*, Esquire, was presented, and read; setting forth, That the Petitioner having been invited to preside as chairman at a public meeting proposed to be held at *Manchester* on the 16th day of August last, for the purpose, as expressed by the requisitionists, and by the advertisements and placards published for calling the same, of taking into consideration “the most legal and effectual means of obtaining a Reform of Commons House of Parliament;” and the Petitioner approving of such intention, and considering the objects to be perfectly legal and constitutional, as well as necessary, without any hesitation accepted and attended the same, as an act of public duty towards his distressed and suffering fellow countrymen; that on the Petitioner’s arrival in Lancashire on finding that considerable irritation had been excited among the people by an interference of Magistrates to prevent a previous meeting which had been announced, the Petitioner, with a view to tranquillise the public mind, secure the public peace, and exhibit the true objects of the meeting beyond the possibility of successful misrepresentation, wrote, and caused to be printed and circulated, and address to the inhabitants of *Manchester* and its neighbourhood, of which the following are the principle paragraphs, “You will meet on Monday next, my friends, and by your steady, firm, and temperate deportment you will convince all your enemies, you feel that have an important and imperious public duty to perform, and that you will not suffer any private consideration on earth to deter you from exerting every nerve to carry your praise-worthy and patriotic intentions into effect; the eyes of all *England*, nay of all *Europe*, are fixed upon you, and every friend of real Reform, and of rational liberty, is tremblingly alive to the result of your meeting on Monday next; our enemies will seek every opportunity, by the means of their sanguinary agents, to excite a riot, that they may have a pretence for spilling our blood, reckless of the awful and certain retaliation that would ultimately fall on their heads; every friend of real and effectual Reform is offering up to Heaven a devout prayer that you may follow the example of your brethren of the metropolis, and by your steady, patient, preserving, and peaceable conduct on that day, frustrate their hellish and bloody purpose; come then my friends, to the meeting on Monday, armed with no other weapon but that of a self-approving conscience; determined not to suffer yourselves to be irritated, or excited by any means whatsoever to commit and breach of the public peace; our opponents have not attempted to show that our reasoning is fallacious, or that our conclusions are incorrect, by any argument but the threat of violence, and to put us down by the force of the sword, the bayonet, and the cannon; they assert that your leaders do nothing but mislead and deceive you, although they well know that the eternal principles of truth and justice are too deeply engraven on your hearts; and that you are at length become (unfortunately for them) too well acquainted with your own rights, ever again to suffer any man, or any faction to mislead you; we hereby invite the Boroughreeve, or any of the nine wise Magistrates who signed the Proclamation declaring the meeting to have been held on Monday last illegal, and threatening at the same time all those who abstained from going to the said meeting; we invite them to come amongst us on Monday next; if we are wrong it is their duty as men, as Magistrates, and as Christians, to endeavour to set us right by argument, by reason, and by the mild and irresistible precepts of persuasive truth; we promise them an attentive hearing, and to abide by the result of conviction alone; but once for all we repeat, that we despise their threats, and abhor and

detest those who would direct or control the mind of man by violence or force; I am, my fellow countrymen, your sincere and faithful friend, *Henry Hunt*;" that several affidavits were on the second day of the present Term tendered by the Petitioner to the Judges of the Court of King's Bench at *Westminster*, for the purpose of obtaining a criminal information against the Bench of Magistrates of *Manchester*, for the criminal acts and wrongs therein described; which affidavits were not however permitted to be read, on the novel ground, that no one could be allowed to move in a proceeding which merely tended to establish a criminal prosecution except through His Majesty's Attorney or Solicitor General, or other Counsel; although this new Rule of Court is obviously contrary to the principle, which permits every man in person to accuse before the Grand Jury, and is in direct violation of Magna Charta and the Bill of Rights; the Petitioner therefore immediately applied to the public Law Officer of the Crown, the Attorney General, and offered to lay his whole case, and the affidavits before him, that he might move the Court on behalf of the public, which the Attorney General refused; the Petitioner is therefore compelled to submit his case to the consideration of the House, as the only means which the Constitution now appears to present, and which at the same time is commensurate with the power and influence of the offenders, particularly after they had received the countenance of His Majesty's Ministers, by the official thanks of His Royal Highness the Prince Regent; the Petitioner respectfully submits to the consideration of the House, that as the persons guilty of the outrages described in those affidavits, consisted of ten Magistrates acting in the vicinity, having extensive local and family connections, and as the Officers and Privates of the Yeomanry Cavalry who perpetrated the cruelties therein described, were in like manner intimately connected with all or most of the persons exercising juridical and magisterial authority in the County of *Lancaster*, and were supported by a numerous train of dependents, unprincipled and desperate characters connected with the Police, as it is notorious it must always be the case in Police establishments; the Petitioner and ten other persons, whose political rights had been violated, and whose persons had been outraged, had, and can have no chance of obtaining redress of justice in the said district under such influence; and therefore the Petitioner and his fellow sufferers not only found themselves insolently baffled in every attempt which they made to obtain legal redress, but the said criminal parties, for the purpose of giving colour to their errors of crimes, conspired to invent, fabricate, and sustain criminal charges against the Petitioner and his friends, and had the hardihood to commit them to solitary dungeons in the local prison, on the charges of High Treason; which impotent and malignant charges they afterwards abandoned, but for the pretence aforesaid, still persisted in charging the outraged, injured, and insulted Petitioner and his friends with a misdemeanour and conspiracy, demanding excessive bail of them, and in a vexatious and wanton manner sending the Petitioner and others upwards of fifty miles through the country to *Lancaster* Castle, under the parade of military escort, and accompanied by every circumstance calculated to wound the feelings of the Petitioner and his friends and fellow sufferers; and as it happened that the Assizes were held about ten days afterwards, the said criminal parties hoping to take advantage of the excessive irritation which all the circumstances above described had created in the county, and of the influence which they necessarily possessed over the prejudices of many of the Grand Jurors, who consisted wholly of persons in the magistracy of the said County, and who therefore were unavoidably actuated by the very same party violence which had misled their brother Magistrates of *Manchester* in committing those crimes which it was now become necessary, under colour of Law, to screen from inquiry and punishment; that is to say, the said Magistrates and Yeomanry of *Manchester*, through the agency of their friends, connection, and relatives, who composed the Grand Jury aforesaid, and aided by the Solicitor of His Majesty's Treasury, proceeded to act the unworthy farce of presenting indictments against the Petitioner and his friends for a pretended conspiracy, for acts committed by them in the open face of day, in presence of the whole world, and in which they were supported by the immemorial rights, customs, and usages of the *English* people,

and by the Laws and Constitution of the Realm as exercised by their ancestors, and secured by Acts of Parliament, by the Common Law of the Land, and by the Coronation Oath of the Sovereign; the Petitioner, who profoundly respects all the legitimate arrangements of the Jury system, is nevertheless persuaded, that his suspicions, in regard to the frivolous; and he ventures to suggest, that so palpable was the connection of the Magistrates and Yeomanry with the Grand Jury at *Lancaster*, that nothing but the consciousness of the necessity of shielding themselves under the colour of a form of Law, could have stimulated them to adopt the gross measure of appealing for their justification to a Grand Jury of such men so situated; but although the Petitioner formally protested against some of the Jurors, who he had been able to discover were relations, and notoriously connected with the parties against whom he had better reason to complain, and who were implicated in the atrocities committed on the 16th of August at *Manchester*, and against whom Bills of Indictments for capital felonies the Petitioner was prepared to present; yet these objections of the Petitioner were overruled by the Judge before whom the said parties were about to be sworn as Grand Jurors; and the said Grand Jury, composed as aforesaid, proceeded to entertain the said charges against the Petitioner and his friends, and actually laid aside certain indictments which the Petitioner and his friends had previously preferred against three persons who had committed palpable perjury before the Magistrates at Manchester, and who, as afterwards appeared, were witnesses on the indictment against the Petitioner and his friends; and to this, and the following circumstances, the Petitioner most earnestly invites the attention of the House; *viz.* that the said Grand Jury had found a true bill for perjury against one *Owen*, and they had before them other indictments against two wretches of the names of *Platt* and *Derbyshire*, who had falsely sworn to the very same facts as the said *Owen*, and against whom the very same evidence was ready to be adduced; but as soon as the indictments against the Petitioner and his friends for the said pretended conspiracy were carried before the said Grand Jury, composed as aforesaid, and the names of *Platt* and *Derbyshire* appeared as witness on the back of the said indictment, the said Grand Jury refused to proceed further in the investigation of the three indictments before them, one of which they had found, but proceeded to investigate the indictment against the Petitioner and his friends, actually receiving the evidence of the said *Platt* and *Derbyshire* in support of the same, and then, after finding on such evidence, and that of three or four other similar dependents of the Police, true bills against the Petitioner and his friends for a conspiracy as aforesaid, the said Grand Jury *ignored* the indictment against the witnesses *Platt* and *Derbyshire*, although they had found a true bill for the very same fact, on the very same evidence, against *Owen*; that these facts, of which the Petitioner had made affidavit, in the humble judgement of the Petitioner, prove beyond the possibility of doubt or equivocation, that although there were honourable men on the said Grand Jury, yet that the number of twelve required by Law to determine a bill were influenced in their judgements by passions and feelings of which men are too frequently the patients, and therefore it cannot be a matter of surprise, that a true bill was found against the petitioner and his friends, for acts which, it is palpable, were as notorious as the sun at noon day, and which till it suited their purpose, had always been considered as meritorious duties of *Britons* and freemen, while the bills for unparalleled and cruel outrages were ignored; nevertheless, as the Petitioner respectfully submits to the House, it must be obvious, that against so powerful a conspiracy of local Authorities, countenanced as they have been by His Majesty's Ministers, and aided by the Law Officers of the Crown, who are supported by the public Treasury of the United Kingdom, the Petitioner had no rational ground of hope for justice and redress but in the power and authority of the House; that besides the application, above described, the Court of King's Bench, and to the Attorney General, the Petitioner brought witnesses from *Lancashire*, at a heavy cost, for the purpose of presenting indictments before that Grand Inquest, which, as appertaining to the Court of King's Bench, may be supposed to have co-extensive jurisdiction with its Courts, which jurisdiction it unquestionably had before the

Judges were made itinerant, and which had been taken from it by no statute; yet on this occasion, the said Grand Inquest of all *England*, by which name it was heretofore known, was designated by the Judge as the Grand Jury for *Middlesex*, and described as local in its jurisdiction, and incompetent to receive the indictments preferred by the Petitioner; that as the Petitioner verily believes the said criminal parties, for the purpose of securing their own impunity, have made false representation to His Majesty's Government, by which they obtained the thanks of the Prince Regent, while in Minister of His Royal Highness, with a view to support their own hasty proceedings in so thanking the said criminal parties, have submitted their false statements to the House as authentic documents worthy of the respect and credence of the House; but the Petitioner hereby declares, that within his knowledge, the greater part of the said statements, as relating to the proceedings at *Manchester*, are utterly false; and he therefore earnestly prays, That he may be called to the Bar of the House, and there permitted to prove all and every the allegations contained in this humble Petition, which he is anxious to do, not only by his own testimony, but which he respectfully pledges himself (if permitted) to confirm beyond the possibility of doubt, by the testimony of numerous respectable persons of family, fortune, and character, totally unconnected with the Reformers in any way whatever.