

Account of James Cooper. *Oldham Chronicle* 20 Feb 1885 (in JRL Eng Mss 1197)

(*Transcribed by Peter Castree*)

“MY POLITICAL LIFE SINCE 1816”

This formed the title of an interesting lecture last evening, delivered in the Moorside Liberal Club, by Mr. James Cooper. ... Mr. Cooper was another veteran who had agitated in that reform which began the Charter. Mr. COOPER, an old gentleman of 86 years, then delivered his lecture. ...

He had consented to deliver that lecture to celebrate his eighty-sixth birthday. (Applause.) He wished that he could live long enough to see what he wanted doing politically accomplished. He had fixed the beginning of his experience at 1816, because in that year his first serious experiences began. He got very badly used in that year at a Radical meeting. It was held at the bottom of the Bent, called, and legally so, for the purpose of petitioning Parliament for the repeal of the Corn Laws, voting by ballot, and the largest part of the Charter. There was a universal state of starvation; children crying for bread, and their parents unable to give it them. Flour was 6s. a peck of twelve pounds, and everything in proportion. The meeting was called, and, the authorities being alarmed, about 25 or 30 special constables were sworn in. After Henry Hunt had spoken he went with John Clegg, son of Abraham Clegg, hat manufacturer, Bottom o’th Bent, to the Swan Inn, where the special constables were drinking. As a workman named Radcliffe was arrested by the officious constables, Clegg remonstrated with them, and was set on in turn and kicked savagely. As he was nearly strangled in the struggle, the lecturer went to his assistance, but was himself violently assaulted, “punced”, and thrown into the deep mud of the unpaved streets. Radcliffe was arrested, but escaped from the lockup, which was then opposite the Old Church, only to be re-arrested and taken before a magistrate. Had he been found guilty he would have got five or seven years’ penal servitude, or perhaps transportation, but, fortunately, he got off.

The next thing he (the lecturer) could remember was the famous 19th [sic] of August, 1819, the memorable day of Peterloo. It was so-called after Waterloo. He went there early, the meeting not having commenced, so he waited. Hunt was on the hustings, and there were some 25 or 30 banners floating, held by women dressed in white. As he looked he thought he never saw a grander sight in his life, nor had he since. All the housetops were covered with sight-seers; all the factories and other high buildings where people would have a chance of seeing. He went from the place of meeting to the other side of the square, where there was a cottage house, in the upper rooms of which were five magistrates looking through the open window. Near by was a double line of constables. The sight of these made him think that there was something wrong, as he did not see the necessity for it. The crowd, however, said that the authorities were “nobbut tryin’ to fear us,” so he stayed, going among the constables to hear what he could. There were some cannon planted at the bottom of the square, and the military were near by. After a little while – not a quarter of an hour – he heard the clatter of the

horses' feet in the street, and saw the soldiers come at full gallop right on the platform. The cannon and other soldiers had blocked up that end of the square, and the military galloped right into the crowd without any warning whatever that he saw. Hunt called out to the crowd to stand still, but before the cavalry "butchers" got properly among them they broke and scattered. The soldiers then took Hunt and dragged him off the stage, and took him up the double line of constables, and he saw every man that could get at him – and there were not less than 150 – strike at him. He was taken into the cottage where the magistrates were, and put in a chair near the door. He should never forget seeing him, pale as death, motion, in vain, for water. His clothes were torn off his back; his coat, vest, and even shirt were torn to ribbons. He was quickly taken to the New Bailey. The butchers were all the time slashing and cutting at anyone, no matter whom; flags and banners were slit, and women wounded. They had no mercy, and did their best to murder. Had it not been for the mercy of the officer in command in drawing off the troops and allowing the people to escape he thought that many hundreds would have been killed by being trampled upon and by the soldiers. The remembrance made him shudder still. By the kindness of a constable he got away, and ran about a quarter of a mile, when he stopped in a street. A soldier galloped towards him, and he frantically tried the cottage doors, but that day they were closed to everyone. The soldier meant having a blow at someone, and he rode at him when in a doorway. He (the speaker) had a short stick in his hand, and struck with it in self-defence. He missed the soldier, but, striking the horse on the nose, caused it to swerve, and nearly unhorsed his assailant. He immediately took to his heels, and left the scene as quickly as possible.