

TS11/1056 Statement of Charles Wright, Manchester.  
(Transcribed by Geoff Barlow)

Manchester reform meeting  
August 16<sup>th</sup> 1819  
Statement of the proceedings by Charles Wright

At half past 10 o'clock I proceeded to the place appointed for the meeting of political Reformers, which is known as St Peters Place. I proceeded to the spot where the hustings were to be erected, which at this time mainly consisted of one cart stationed at the North East extremity of the ground and commanding a full view of the whole square.

At 11 o'clock, there might have been about 1000 men and boys assembled. I was standing near the cart. In less than half an hour, the first body of reformers made their appearance, marching from Mosley Street. I was informed they were the division from the Stockport district. The[y] came in the following order.

Martial music.

A deputation of 12 maiden reformers draped with white caps.

Two banners each of which was surmounted with a cap of liberty. One of these banners bore the inscription of Annual Parliaments and Universal Suffrage, on the reverse, Vote by ballot. The second banner had an inscription No Corn Laws.

Women next marched in procession four abreast, generally with handkerchiefs slung over their heads, and tied under the chin. In two or three instances, I observed these women had infants lashed to their backs.

Next followed females four and four of all ages and sizes, from ten years of age and upwards.

The men closed the rear, marching four abreast, generally arm in arms with walking sticks. This party was more than twenty minutes in coming on the ground. They took their stations in an orderly manner, the women forming the inner circle round the cart.

In a few minutes afterwards, another strong party arrived on the ground, which I understood came from the Oldham district. The same order of march was observed as above described.

At this time, their appearance assumed a formidable appearance.

The Oldham Female Reformers was the most numerous body, and the deputation which came designated female standard bearers, by far the most respectable, their banner was made of silk, one of which had an inscription, Annual Parliaments, Universal Suffrage & Vote by Ballot. Underneath were inscribed Major Cartwright's Bill. From the want of wind to spread the banners, I could scarcely note down or make any remark of the various other inscriptions. On one banner was a representation of Justice, with a Cap of Liberty, holding in her hands a pair of scales and a sword, watched by the Eye of Providence, underneath an inscription Oldham Union.

The next party, I believe was from the Royton District. The females had the charge of two red flags, one inscribed Let Us Die Like Men And Not Be Sold Like Slaves. On another The People are the Legitimate Representatives of Sovereignty. Another party soon followed, which, from their banner, was inscribed underneath Saddleworth and Mossley Union. This flag excited round the hustings much alarm, and its appearance by no means approved of. It was painted black with black tassels. The inscription was in large white

letters, namely Taxation without Representation is Unjust and Tyrannical. Equal Representation or Death on the other side Liberty Or Death Unite & be Free.

It was now passed twelve o'clock, which was the hour appointed for taking the chair. My attention was so much occupied with the scenes around me and from the faintings of women and subsequently the arrival of another cart with planks, that I could not distinguish the march of more bodies of Reformers.

As soon as the hustings were enlarged, I took my station on the west side, which commanded a full view of the assemblage. I then observed fresh parties coming up, and in a very few minutes they were all stationed, the women taking the rear of the hustings. The banners were removed from the hustings and planted in two lines fronting the populace, and a passage was left open to approach the stage without any apparent difficulty. A young man occasionally addressed the multitude urging them to preserve good order. To keep them in good humour a party of musicians mounted the hustings & played one or two indifferent tunes, whilst one or two of them were dancing and exhibiting their hats in the air. Several others were exulting in the powerful numbers assembled and speaking in bold terms of their victory. I looked around and perceived that the inner circle of people stood firmly locked arm in arm & to my surprise I saw at about twenty yards distant from the hustings a body of Men with their hats off and their hair appeared of a light colour cropped in one shape exhibiting very prominent foreheads. From the depth of their circular lines I should imagine that there were about 600 of this singular description of people. The pressure among the multitude now became excessive, which, added to the heat of the weather was intolerable and numbers of women were dropping down with exhaustion and fatigue. It was impossible to give these poor people any relief. I looked around for the purpose of gaining a correct estimate of the numbers assembled. One of the reformers who appeared to take an active part in the preliminary business of the day, informed me that the muster from the districts would exceed 38,000 reformers, that is, those who belong to male and female societies independent of stragglers. Upon a fair calculation there were near 65,000 on the ground.

At a little after one o'clock, a shout at a distance announced the arrival of Hunt. Precisely at half past one o'clock an open landau came opposite the hustings, the people continued shouting in all directions. The procession which accompanied the landau swelled the numbers into an impenetrable mass and created a confusion which baffles all description. Before the landau was carried boards with the words Order, Order, two flags for Annual Parliaments & Universal Suffrage. A woman sat on the dickey of the landau with a flag representing Britannia crowned with a cap of liberty, trampling corruption under her feet and holding in her hands a roll. From the bustle prevailing I could not decipher the scroll, underneath were the words Manchester Reform.

Before Hunt would ascend the hustings, he commanded the musical instruments to be removed, and many improper persons to get down. This being effected, Knight first ascended, then Hunt, when he was hailed with long cheers. Johnson, Saxton, Moorhouse, Carlisle, and I believe, Fitton then made their appearance. I was told Harrison was also on the hustings, with several others.

The flags (10 in number and five caps of liberty) being arranged, and something like regularity prevailed on the hustings, Johnson came forward and proposed that Henry Hunt Esquire be appointed the Chairman. It was not seconded, but Johnson put the question to the multitude and moved that it be carried with acclamation. This was accordingly done

with three times three tremendous cheers. After the noise had in a measure subsided Hunt returned thanks for the honour of presiding over such a tremendous and overwhelming **multitude** assemblage.

Cheering again took place and Hunt did not at all appear in his usual good temper. He entreated their indulgence, and requested every man to keep silence and not call out silence as that would interrupt the proceedings of the day and render those at a distance from hearing him. Silence was now obtained.

Hunt looked round and observing me, whispered (sic) to a gentleman sitting by my left side.

He then called to those who were the proprietors of the hustings to clear the stage of persons who had no business there. Looking at me, he said, Why does he not go down? I don't know him? I then deemed it necessary to rise up and give my address. One or two persons corroborated what I said, I told Hunt that I was surprised he did not know me.

Hunt turned round rather indignantly, and addressing the mob said he hoped that they would exercise their right and if any person attempted to interrupt their proceedings that they would put him down, and keep him there!!

Hunt now saw all was impatient silence. He began his speech. "My Fellow Countrymen" said he, our enemies had considered that the postponement of your meeting from Monday last to this day was a glorious victory, but their subsequent conduct has proved that they have sustained a shameful defeat. It was unnecessary for him to recall to their recollection the transactions of the last ten days, and he should not say much about it except that those who attempted to put them down by threats and malignant exertions had caused them to meet on that day in twofold numbers (applause). There had been several placards stuck about the town and properly circulated, signed by some obscure persons such as Tom Long or Jack Short, a printer whom nobody knew reflecting . . .

Knight, who was standing behind Hunt whispered (sic) something in his ear – I thought Knight said "I hope sir, you will give some satisfactory explanation." [Pencil note]. ("Hunt's Genuine Beer" "Letter to the friends of Reform" signed "A Patriot" are the publications alluded to.)

Hunt turned round and with warmth said to Knight, "Sir, I will not be interrupted; when you speak yourself, you will not like to experience such interruption, and why should we (I think he said differ or quarrel) for we are friends in the same cause."

Hunt was about to proceed, when a noise at the distant part of the area caused a pause. The military immediately afterwards made their appearance. Hunt inquired what Cavalry they were? He was told the Yeomanry of Manchester. Hunt turned round to Johnson and said "there's a treat."

An awful silence prevailed. Hunt addressed the meeting, and said with an energetic tone, "My friends stand firm"!! and then with a sarcastic smile, pointing his finger in the direction of the military, said, "Look for they are in disorder already, let us give them three cheers." The mob said "we will." Hunt then waved his hat for the signal of three cheers.

The Military were now forming their ranks, and returned the cheers with their swords brandished in the air.

After a short pause the Manchester Yeomanry advanced as quick as Mr Nadin and his officers and constables cleared the way to the hustings. I saw the mob about the outskirts scampering in all directions. My whole attention was now fixed upon the Cavalry, and from my position on the hustings I could plainly discern every proceeding. I was not at

all alarmed, because the Military were gently moving forward, and not a sword was used to clear the passage. Two Gentlemen on horseback, and Nadin, with his posse passed by me and then the Yeomanry came up, and with some difficulty surrounded the hustings.

I understood the cavalry to say, "Surrender" to those on the hustings. The people about the hustings were ordered to disperse, but the order was little obeyed, and until then not a sword was used or applied to the multitude, and from their obstinacy in hanging about the hustings much confusion ensued.

At this moment I saw Hunt and Johnson removed from the hustings, and in such a trying situation, I was at a loss to guide my own measures of personal safety.

The flag with the inscription 'Death or Liberty' was planted near where I was seated, and this obnoxious emblem was an object to get possession of, and much opposition was manifested to its surrender. The Yeomanry was determined to have it, and then the sabre was used, and in the scuffle I unfortunately received a sabre wound over the left shoulder.

The intermixture of the Special Constables with the people and military occasioned me to receive some wounds, before I was carefully in the custody of the police. When I told them my business on the hustings, I was instantly protected, and – remained on the ground – one minute might have transpired from the time Hunt was taken off the hustings, when I looked round the scene, and instantly as I turned my eye to the front of the stage, five or six shots were discharged from among the body of the men, whose appearance I have described by a reference to page 6.\*

From fear I begged the police officers to escort me off the ground and I took refuge in Mr Buxton's house, where the Magistrates assembled.

With the exception of the few shots which were fired in the centre of the area, I did not see any precise object of defiance, and I do most firmly believe that but very few individuals were injured until a charge was made by the Cavalry to clear the ground after the shots were fired.

The fact of every individual being removed from the hustings without sustaining personal injury corroborates this assertion.

The accidental injury which I sustained would not admit me of following up the train of important circumstances.

I have confined myself to a faithful detail of what transpired under my observation, and to which I must conscientiously inscribe my name, and will, unbiased by all the falsehoods I have read of the transactions of that day give my honest and impartial opinion.

Signed

Charles Wright

\*[Editor's note: that is, the men with unusually cropped hair close to the hustings.]