

# **The forgotten story of how a national crisis in the years 1816-1820 impacted on Lymm and how close the village came to being the scene of a major conflict.**

## **The country in turmoil**

The years immediately following the Napoleonic Wars (1815 onwards) were a time of great turmoil in England that brought enormous hardship to the working masses. This was nowhere more true than in Manchester – by now a major industrial centre as the beating heart of the cotton industry – and also in the towns and villages that surrounded it.

Wages in the mills of industrial Manchester had fallen sharply as skilled handloom weavers were replaced by the factory system and there was a widespread hunger for thousands who also lived in squalid conditions.

Lymm on the other hand was still at this time very much an agricultural settlement with a population of around 2,000. It was controlled by a small number of families of “gentry” who owned the vast majority of the land. These included Trafford Esquire of Oughtrington Hall whose name appears frequently as the de-facto spokesman for the community at that time.

Like ordinary people across the country the folk of Lymm were already struggling with the results of the Enclosure Act, which took effect locally in 1765. This removed many of the common grazing and farming rights of small farmers and gave better off landowners the opportunity to consolidate their holdings and wealth.

Rural areas were hit by a further treble hammer blow around this time. 1816 was known as the year without a summer when severe weather led to disastrous harvests and major food shortages. This followed hard on the heels of the 1815 Corn Laws. Ostensibly these were intended to protect agricultural workers from the impact on jobs of cheap foreign grain but in practice the import ban pushed prices up and supplies down resulting in more hardship and near starvation for many.

1816 too saw the passing of the Game Law which restricted all hunting and killing of animals to landowners. This effectively turned a huge proportion of the population into illegal poachers overnight and led to further deprivation and hunger among the poor masses.

## **A rising tide of protest and rebellion**

It is hardly surprising then that the country saw a rising tide of protest and rebellion. In Manchester a group described as the Manchester Radicals was formed. Their main demand was a voice for common people in parliament via a fairer system of representation. (At the time the combined boroughs of Manchester, Salford, Bolton, Blackburn, Rochdale, Ashton-under-Lyne and Oldham were represented by just two MP's. while in the south of England there was one constituency that elected two MPS with a single voter.)

A large meeting was held in Manchester in November 1816 “*to take into account the distressed state of the country*”. Among their demands was the right to vote for all males 18 and over and a member of parliament for every 20,000 citizens. Counter groups were formed, mainly by the well off and worthy to plan how to counteract this “*dangerous widespread conspiracy for the*

*subversion of public order*". At a further meeting in December the Radicals resolved to send out "missionaries" to neighbouring towns and villages seeking their support.

## Protest at the Cross

And so it was against this backdrop on a cold winter's day, January 16<sup>th</sup> 1817 that a group, probably all men, and including speakers from Manchester took up position at the Cross in Lymm to proclaim their message. Quite how well they were received or how many were present is difficult to tell. The newspapers at the time reported the event but as members of the establishment they clearly saw it as their role to denigrate the protestors as vagabonds, thieves and drunkards. The newspaper admits to a crowd of fifty but given their determination to discredit the whole affair it is quite likely there were many more.

It is clear that there had been some forward planning. Handbills had been spread round the village beforehand and there were certainly local people in attendance. One of the key speakers was "*an apothecary, recently arrived in the village*". He and other speakers, probably from Manchester covered a wide range of subjects including equality, suffrage and an appeal for the repeal of the game laws. According to the newspaper at the time the apothecary then descended from the cross and invited the "rabble" to join him in the The Bulls Head where they could also sign a petition of protest. Before they left it was announced that there would be a further meeting on February 7<sup>th</sup> at the same location.

The newspaper report may have been dismissive of the event but they also called upon Mr Hudson, the local constable to "*detain a few of them*" on the flimsy basis that they were probably associated with a rash of recent petty crimes along the canal bank.

## Twenty Lymm special constables drafted in

Whatever the newspapers thought one section of the Lymm community certainly felt threatened by the protest and decided to take action. A meeting was called and chaired by Trafford Trafford Esq of Oughtrington Hall. It was held on January 30<sup>th</sup> at the Lymm School House. According to the same Chester newspaper that had reported on the protesting "rabble" at the Cross this one was attended by a "*numerous and respectable*" audience. .. The meeting expressed deep regret at "*the mischievous endeavours of designing and disaffected people to create discontent and disorder among the labouring classes in this parish*". They maintained that those signing the petition had been duped, believing they were putting their name to "*better trade*" when in fact they were petitioning for parliamentary reform.

Most significantly the meeting voted to immediately appoint and swear in twenty special constables in anticipation of the next Radicals meeting in Lymm on February 7<sup>th</sup>. Residents were also urged to keep a "vigilant watch on strangers and emissaries".

They were clearly concerned by the potential scale of the second meeting as more and more similar gatherings were reported from around the region.

## Press calls for military intervention in Lymm

The Cheshire newspaper went one step further .. "*We earnestly recommend the judicious disposal of a military force that if rebellion should dare to raise its crest it may be cast down ... the disaffected in the neighbourhood of Lymm and Warrington are numerous and no measures are spared to excite in their minds every opposition to the constituted authorities.*"

In the end Lymm was spared the prospect of such a major confrontation. There are no further reports in the press so it seems likely that the second meeting was never held. It was maybe felt by the Radicals that another meeting in Lymm was not worth the risk and anyway they were busy planning a protest march to London that would present petitions appealing directly to the Prince Regent to take urgent steps to improve the Lancashire cotton trade. The 5,000 who were to take part in March formed in small groups in an attempt to evade the recently enacted law that forbade assemblies of more than ten people. Nevertheless the Riot Act was read and the march was broken up by the Kings Dragoon Guards who arrested 27 and pursued and attacked the remnants of the groups.

Immediately following this concern was expressed in some quarters that perhaps the authorities had overstepped the mark. This was countered the following day by a claim that a major conspiracy had been uncovered that showed that many northern towns would rise up and overthrow the local regiment and would burn down mills.

It never happened but “The Blanketeers March” as it became known and the subsequent fear of conspiracy led the Manchester magistrates to form the short-lived Manchester and Salford Yeomanry cavalry, intended to combat any future attempts at insurrection. It became infamous two years later for its role in the Peterloo Massacre.

Meanwhile Lymm settled back into some sort of normality. It is perhaps no coincidence that just a month after the radicals’ meeting at the Cross. This advertisement appeared in the local press *“WANTED- FOR THE PARISH OF LYMM. – A person to take the office of Standing Overseer to the Poor and Special or Assistant Constable “*

The ad gives little clue to the job description though the combination of “overseer” and “constable” may suggest he ( because it was stipulated it should be a man) would be no social worker.

Life was as hard as ever and punishment was severe for anyone caught stepping out of line. In the same month the Chester paper reported in just two lines

*Thomas Percival, aged 37, a weaver from Lymm, charged with stealing calico, the property of Henry Hindley and Thomas Bradshaw – Transported 14 years.*

## **Massacre in Manchester**

While things may have settled down in Lymm the general unrest continued and became more intense. In the Summer of 1819 the newly formed “Manchester Patriotic Union” announced a meeting to be held on August 2<sup>nd</sup> at St Peter’s Fields in the city centre ( though it was later postponed by two weeks)

Many people sensed an imminent insurrection and there was a feeling the country was in a state of extreme crisis. Smaller outlying towns could only watch as tension mounted. In Lymm another meeting was convened, most probably by Trafford Trafford again ( though this is not confirmed) on August 9<sup>th</sup> 1819 to *“express the firm determination of the subscribers to aid to the utmost of their power the civil authorities in maintaining peace and public tranquillity in this time of awful crisis”*.

Similar meetings were held around the county in places like Sandbach, Northwich and Worsley.

The same edition of the newspaper that told of the Lymm meeting reported what it described as regular unprecedented levels of violence and civil disobedience on the streets of Manchester, often in reaction to the authorities attempts to ban all public gatherings.

The date of Lymm's meeting – August 9<sup>th</sup> - is notable. Exactly one week later between 60,000 and 80,000 gathered in St Peters Field in Manchester , Many were dressed in their Sunday best to hear Henry Hunt speak on the subject of parliamentary reform. By end of the day at least twelve would be dead(more died later of injuries) including women and children and six hundred were injured under the onslaught of the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry in what came to be known infamously as the Peterloo Massacre.

## **1821 – God Save the King**

Ironically the next recorded gathering at Lymm Cross was in 1821 .. on the 19<sup>th</sup> July to celebrate the coronation of the Prince Regent as he became George IV. The day was masterminded by Trafford Trafford Esq. There was a hog roast and ale. The children occupied the steps of the cross while a special stage had been erected for the gentry to sit in comfort. The band reportedly played God Save the King sixteen times during the day while the "*multitudes*" we are told cheered heartily at the discharge of cannons and musquetry.

One cannot help but wonder if the Apothecary was there or whether he was even still in business.

Most of Lymm probably didn't know it but it sat that year on the verge of major change that would bring a new kind of poverty to the village.. There were great upheavals in Manchester with a transformation in the structure of employment in the cotton industry. Merchants were forced to start looking further afield to find labour for the arduous but poorly paid trade of fustian cutting. Within a few years the first workshops would be open in Lymm and just 40 years later more than 700 people in the village, some as young as 8, would be working, typically 12 hours a day or more, in a thankless, unhealthy, repetitive and poorly paid trade.