



### Peterloo – a case study

The recent 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Peterloo massacre in Manchester (in 1819) has produced a range of responses, including the 2019 film called *Peterloo*, documenting the grim events of that day. The facts of the attacks on many impoverished and disenfranchised people who had gathered peacefully to hear a speech from Mr Henry Hunt, campaigner for voting rights, are well known. Hansard, however, can help us engage with the fallout from this catastrophic event and see how the main players were reacting as well as how the symbolism of Peterloo has been employed in political discussion since then.

The Hansard at Huddersfield website can help us to both ask and answer questions about Peterloo. There is no single way to search the database, but there are a range of potential searches that can help direct the researcher or the interested reader to the relevant speeches and format them and/or download them to show how a historic event has been received in parliament. Here you will find some example searches which throw light on this topic, but there are of course many other possibilities.

### Advanced searching by speaker

One of the significant characters in the story of Peterloo was Henry Hunt, a reformer who was the main speaker on the day of the massacre. He later (1830-32) became MP for Preston, so one question of interest is the extent to which he spoke about the events of Peterloo whilst he was an MP. Searching in the advanced search window by limiting the dates (to his years in office) and choosing Mr Henry Hunt as speaker produces the slightly surprising answer that out of his 738 contributions in the House of Commons<sup>1</sup>, only two had an explicit mention of Peterloo:

Date	Member	Contribution
1832-08-03	Mr Henry Hunt	... It appear that the blood of the people of England had been shed very unnecessarily; and, as was well observed in the newspaper, nothing of the sort had occurred in that county since the bloody transactions of <b>Peterloo</b> . ... <a href="#">[0 more]</a>
1832-03-15	Mr Henry Hunt	... her across the thighs with his sabre. He would venture to say, that neither in foreign nor domestic wars, had English soldiers committed acts so disgraceful as those which were perpetrated by the Yeomanry at <b>Peterloo</b> . He would ask any man of humanity in that House, whether such disgraceful acts ought to be passed by unnoticed and unpunished, merely because it could be said, that twelve years had elapsed si... <a href="#">[0 more]</a>

These extracts have some context to show how Peterloo is being referred to by Henry Hunt, but for some purposes it can be instructive to see the wider context in which the reference is made. Clicking on the contribution itself will bring up the whole entry for that speaker. In the

<sup>1</sup> Though one should take care over the statistics produced on data pre-1905 when not every speech in parliament is recorded in Hansard.

first case, he is making a comparison between events in Clitheroe and the Peterloo massacre in a reasonably short intervention which finishes with this paragraph:

With respect to this transaction at Clitheroe, it would appear that the blood of the people of England had been shed very unnecessarily; and, as was well observed in the newspaper, nothing of the sort had occurred in that county since the bloody transactions of **Peterloo**.

Note that since much of Hansard in its early days was extracted from comprehensive news reports, it is often reported in the third person, though the tone and attitude of the original is nevertheless often evident, as we can see in the paragraph quoted above (e.g. 'the bloody transactions of Peterloo').

The other contribution in which Henry Hunt referenced Peterloo is much longer (3847 words) and can be downloaded from the site if needed, for closer scrutiny. Though remaining in third person reporting mode, there are some very vivid passages in this speech which convey the actions and atmosphere of the events of that day:

It could be proved, that one female had been overturned, and her face being down a hill, part of her person was exposed.

Some persons looking from a window called to a Yeoman to render her that assistance which any one, with a sense of decency, would naturally hasten to render on an occasion of the kind.

Now, what did this gallant Yeoman do? Would the House believe it? Would Englishmen credit it? This brave, this loyal, soldier, rode up to the prostrate woman and cut her across the thighs with his sabre.

He would venture to say, that neither in foreign nor domestic wars, had English soldiers committed acts so disgraceful as those which were perpetrated by the Yeomanry at **Peterloo**.

## The ongoing significance of Peterloo

Going back to the basic search function, we can consider both the reactions of others at the time and also the continuing influence of Peterloo on the collective memory of parliamentarians. Here is the line graph of a search on both Houses (Commons and Lords) of the whole database:



This is an excellent example of a potentially misleading graph, so it is worth exploring it in a little more depth. The normalisation that is set as default on the website is *frequency per million words*, so that there is some consistent basis of comparison across time. This works reasonably well with relatively frequent words and/or shorter periods, but with a name like 'Peterloo', the numbers are relatively small and the graph therefore can mislead if you are comparing across a long period. This is because the number of words in Hansard has grown enormously over the years and so the early spikes in this graph represent only one or two occurrences each. The large spike in 1887 represents 10 occurrences in that year, some of which were commenting on the similarity – or difference – between the events in Manchester in 1819 and those in Mitchelstown in County Cork, Ireland, on the occasion of another mass

meeting resulting in death and injury. The contrasting views can be seen in the following extracts from two different speakers in this debate:

And then he says this-- You tell the people that when everything goes well, when they are happy and comfortable, then they may meet freely to recognize their happiness and pass eulogiums on their Government; but that in a moment of war and calamity, of distrust and misconduct, it is not permitted them to meet together, because then instead of eulogising they might think proper to condemn Ministers.

This small extract from a speech by Sir William Harcourt, Liberal politician and (later) holder of some of the highest offices of state<sup>2</sup> appears to uphold the right of citizens to meet and declare their opposition to the powers that rule them. He is speaking in a debate concerning 'Crime and Outrage (Ireland) Right of Public Meeting – Fatal Riot at Mitchelstown'<sup>3</sup> in which he makes a comparison between Mitchelstown and Peterloo, whereas another speaker, the Conservative MP Mr Arthur Balfour<sup>4</sup>, espouses the opposing view and wants to take issue with the comparison:

I am not going into a discussion of **Peterloo**; but this, at any rate, is quite certain about **Peterloo**--that the Yeomanry on that occasion were not acting in self-defence.

Nothing, however, can be more certain than that the whole action of the police at Mitchelstown was not only under the most tremendous provocation, but absolutely in self-defence.

Here, Arthur Balfour appears to be defending the actions of police in the Mitchelstown event. Notice that the order of business for the day's debate define it as a 'riot', which lends credibility to his case or provides evidence of bias in the structures of parliamentary procedure themselves. Returning to the line graph above, we can ascertain (by clicking on the relevant years) that mention of Peterloo remains relatively steady in absolute terms, if not in comparative ones. Thus, there are between 0 and 6 mentions in most of the years represented in the graph.

Whilst many other searches can be made relating to Peterloo, Mitchelstown and others, there is another direction that suggests itself. This is to explore the topic of 'lawful assembly' – i.e. the right to meet in public, demonstrate against the government etc. This freedom is one that is upheld as vital to a functioning democracy, though it was hard-won as the events of Peterloo show. It often finds itself under attack from governments using terrorism and other security risks as justification for reducing the civil liberties of their citizens.

So, a search on 'lawful assembly' alongside the Peterloo search turns up various possible insights, including the use of Peterloo as a warning against limiting these rights:

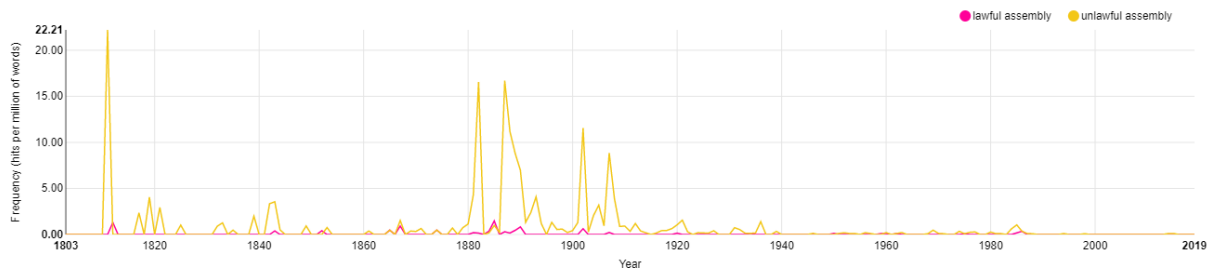
1986-07-24	Mr Alfred Denning	... h grievances can be brought to the knowledge of those in authority--at any rate with such impact as to gain a remedy. Our history is full of warnings against suppression of these rights. Most notable was the <b>Peterloo</b> case, though I shall not go further into that. I went on to say: Such is the right of assembly. So also is the right to meet together, to go in procession, to demonstrate and to protest on mat... <a href="#">[0 more]</a>	Public Order Bill (Hansard, July 1986)	<b>Lords</b>
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We can also see in the following line graph how the topic of 'unlawful assembly' has been much more frequent in parliamentary debate than the opposing term, 'lawful assembly':

<sup>2</sup> Home Secretary, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Leader of the Opposition.

<sup>3</sup> There is an option on the website to see the title of the debate in which the contribution occurs.

<sup>4</sup> Later to become Prime Minister.



This pattern partly reflects the fact that until 1986, ‘unlawful assembly’ was a crime in English law such that the mere suggestion that three or more people meeting in a public space might be planning some kind of sedition<sup>5</sup> was enough to get them arrested. Many of the contributions by speakers refer to individual cases, often in relation to a larger point being made about the injustice of attributing this crime to reasonable activities:

Last year Mr. John Cullinane was charged before two Justices, including Colonel Caddell, with **unlawful assembly**.

The Magistrates decided that no crime was committed, nevertheless they bound the man over to keep the peace, and because he would not confess that he had broken the peace and been guilty of crime by entering into his own recognisances, he was sent to prison for six weeks.

Was anything more monstrous ever heard of? Is it any wonder that the Irish people throw dirt upon, and spit upon, the present administration of the law in Ireland.

This account from 1890, by Mr Clancy<sup>6</sup>, illustrates one of the patterns that can be seen in relation to the ‘crime’ of unlawful assembly (by looking at the overview of concordance lines), which is that it is discussed in parliament most often in connection with Ireland and with the North of England, always at times of trouble when the people are feeling oppressed. In more recent times, during the coal miners’ strike of the 1980s when Margaret Thatcher’s government sought to close down the coal industry, situations arose not so different from those of Peterloo and Mitchelstown; workers under pressure reacted to heavy-handed policing. Home Secretary, Leon Brittan, in 1984, said:

The police were subjected to a considerable level of violence, and to deal with it found it necessary to use both mounted officers and officers equipped with shields and helmets.

Of those arrested, have since been charged with riot.

The remainder have been charged with **unlawful assembly**, assault and public order offences.

This entirely reasonable-sounding reaction to violence against the police finds its echoes amongst the other events in British history which can be investigated alongside each other using the Hansard at Huddersfield website to see how both sides of these arguments play out down the years.

<sup>5</sup> Sedition is variously defined as ‘speech or behaviour intended to persuade other people to oppose the established order (i.e. the government)’ which sounds like almost all political activism in the present day, or a ‘crime against the state’ which is perhaps conveniently vague for those in power to act upon.

<sup>6</sup> John Joseph Clancy, Irish Nationalist and MP for North County Dublin from 1885 to 1918.