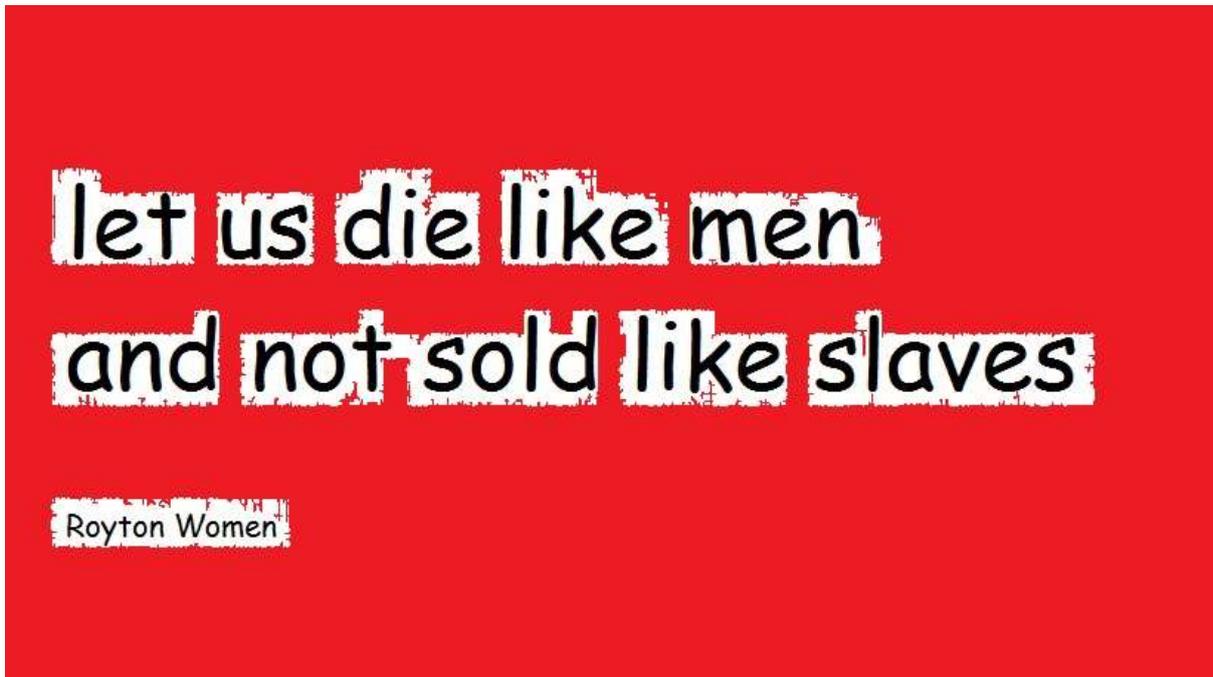


## Peterloo, The Riot Act and Chorley Connections

Given that it is generally recognised that over 50,000 men, women and children attended St. Peter's Fields in Manchester on 16 August 1819 for a peaceful demonstration, it is possible that there may have been some people there from Chorley and/or its surrounding villages. (There was certainly a group from Blackburn). Who they might have been, we will never know. The names of the 15 fatalities are recorded as well as a few other well known figures such as Henry "Orator" Hunt and Samuel Bamford of Middleton.



let us die like men  
and not sold like slaves

Royton Women

Chorley was represented, however, on the side of "Law and Order." One of the Justices of the Peace was John Silvester. He was originally a Yorkshireman, having been baptised in Rotherham. In 1788 he married Joanna Threlfall. She was the daughter of John Threlfall of Chorley, a Hop Merchant and Banker, who as a consequence of his Chorley property was a local Justice of the Peace. Another daughter, Mary, married Rev. Charles Wickstead Ethelston(e) of Wickstead Hall in Cheshire, an Anglican minister and Fellow of the Manchester Collegiate Church (now Manchester Cathedral), and also a Justice of the Peace. The magistrates were the most powerful men in Manchester at the time of Peterloo and were a reactionary group whose main concern was to protect their interests and positions.

# Hunt and Liberty

Whatever wealth Silvester and Ethelston had been born into was enhanced as a result of their marriages. The latter was given a mansion house with 80 to 90 acres of land when he married. Joanna Silvester and her husband John inherited extensive property in Chorley on her father's death in 1804.

The Silvesters lived at Chorcliffe House in Hollinshead Street surrounded by grounds with walks, trees and a stream. John Silvester was a leading member of the Orange Order and split his time between Chorley and Manchester where he had business interests and property which qualified him to be a Justice there. In 1802 he had formed a militia group known as "Silvesters Volunteers" and they had been consecrated in Manchester Collegiate Church by Rev. Ethelston, who was their chaplain. Similar groups were established across the country at this time as the country was at war with Napoleon and there were fears about the influx of French revolutionary ideas. As the leader of this group Silvester was styled "Colonel". Other similar groups were formed in Manchester and Salford and subsequently they evolved into the Yeomanry which had an infamous role at Peterloo.

In 1812, Manchester loyalists proposed an event at the Cotton Exchange to toast the health of the Prince Regent, a controversial figure. Among the signatories for the event were Silvester and Ethelston. There was much war time poverty and distress and a counter demonstration was arranged. The demonstrators broke into the Cotton Exchange and caused extensive damage. Silvester and another magistrate read the riot act.

# Annual Parliaments and Universal Suffrage

The Riot Act dated from 1715 and could be read by a magistrate or constable when faced with 12 or more persons who were considered to be gathered unlawfully or riotously. Those who refused to disperse within an hour were regarded as felons. Silvester's association with the Riot Act is a continuing thread! On this occasion the Cumberland Militia and the Scots Greys were called up to disperse the demonstrators.

Also in 1812 he served on a Grand Jury at Lancaster to hear cases brought against Luddites.

In January 1819, Henry "Orator" Hunt was involved in another demonstration at the Theatre Royal in Manchester. This resulted in troops being called and Silvester was in attendance again. With hind sight this could be seen as the start of a build up of tension that was to lead to Peterloo in August. By 1<sup>st</sup> July concern was so great that five Manchester magistrates, including Silvester and Ethelston, wrote to Lord Sidmouth, the Home Secretary to express their fears that specifically, "we anticipate at no distant period a GENERAL RISING."

Whether there ever was any intention to organise a general rising is another issue, but there was a deliberate escalation of fears about the potential behaviour of the men, women and children who gathered in St. Peter's Fields on 16 August 1819. The story has been told many times, most recently in Mike Leigh's film, and it will not be regurgitated here.

On the morning of the meeting the magistrates, including Silvester and Ethelston, with no real evidence, had petitioned that the gathering endangered the peace of the town. This was the basis for the issuing of arrest warrants for Orator Hunt and the other speakers. The meeting was not illegal however!

Ethelston and Silvester's involvement was with the "reading" of the Riot Act. Inverted commas are used because there are different views as to whether, how or to whom the Act was read. What is certain is that the people gathered in St. Peter's Field did not have an hour to disperse. If the Act was read it was whilst the Yeomanry on their horses were charging onto the field.

The magistrates had cards printed with the words of the Riot Act. It was claimed that Ethelston declaimed the words whilst leaning out of a house window overlooking the field. Others in or in front of the house claimed not to hear Ethelston.

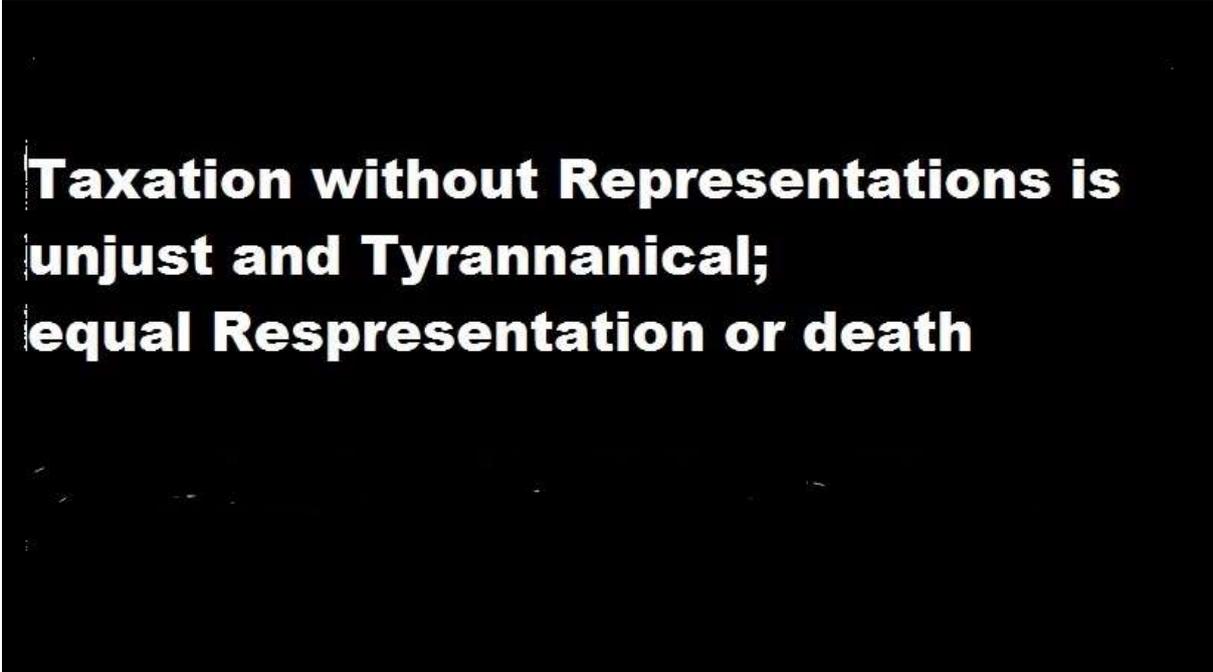
Silvester took one of the cards and went into the crowd, and claimed to have read the Riot Act. It may have been a brave or foolish act, but he returned dirty and dishevelled having seemingly been knocked over in the disturbance. It is clear that neither Ethelston or Silvester had much success.

In the ensuing debacle, resulting in at least 15 deaths, Orator Hunt was arrested with others and subsequently put on trial at York Assizes (a Lancashire Jury might have given a "not guilty" verdict!). Ethelston and Silvester attended the trial along with other magistrates but were not called upon to testify.

After Peterloo Silvester continued to be active in affairs in Chorley. In 1816 he had presented the Duke of York's letter with proposals to alleviate post Napoleonic War distress to Chorley Vestry, an early form of Town Council. In 1826 he was again called upon to read the Riot Act, but this time in Chorley.

Our town was one of several attacked by the East Lancashire loom breakers. The attack had started from Tockholes, eight miles away, and had picked up support from the communities it had passed along the way. Their target was the Water Street mill of Thomas Lightoller and William Harrison which had power looms. The owners were "known as hard and unscrupulous employers," and had previously been convicted of employing children under 8 years of age and making children under 16 work for more than twelve hours a day. The leaders of the attack were not from Chorley but many of the townsfolk "were sympathetic and prepared to help if necessary.....a great multitude of the townspeople outside were their friends."

In that situation John Silvester, as a Justice of the Peace was called to read the Riot Act. Again he was unsuccessful. 80 powerlooms were destroyed and the following year, almost certainly as a consequence of this attack, Harrison and Lightoller were declared bankrupt. (It needs to be noted that there is no connection between William Harrison and the author of this piece!)



**Taxation without Representations is  
unjust and Tyrannanical;  
equal Respresentation or death**

Silvester died soon after the attack on the mill, but not as a result of it as far as is known. He had property worth over £1m at current valuations in Manchester, Chorley, Leyland, Whittle-le-Woods, and Brindle. Land Tax returns identify some of the Chorley properties as being in Hollinshead Street, Lyons Lane, Tootell Street and Red Bank.

John E Harrison

May 2020.

NB The Peterloo banners are replicas: Red from Royton, green from Rochdale and black from Saddleworth. An excellent modern retelling of the Peterloo story can be found in “Peterloo, Voices, Sabres and Silence” by Graham Pythian.