

SAMPLE

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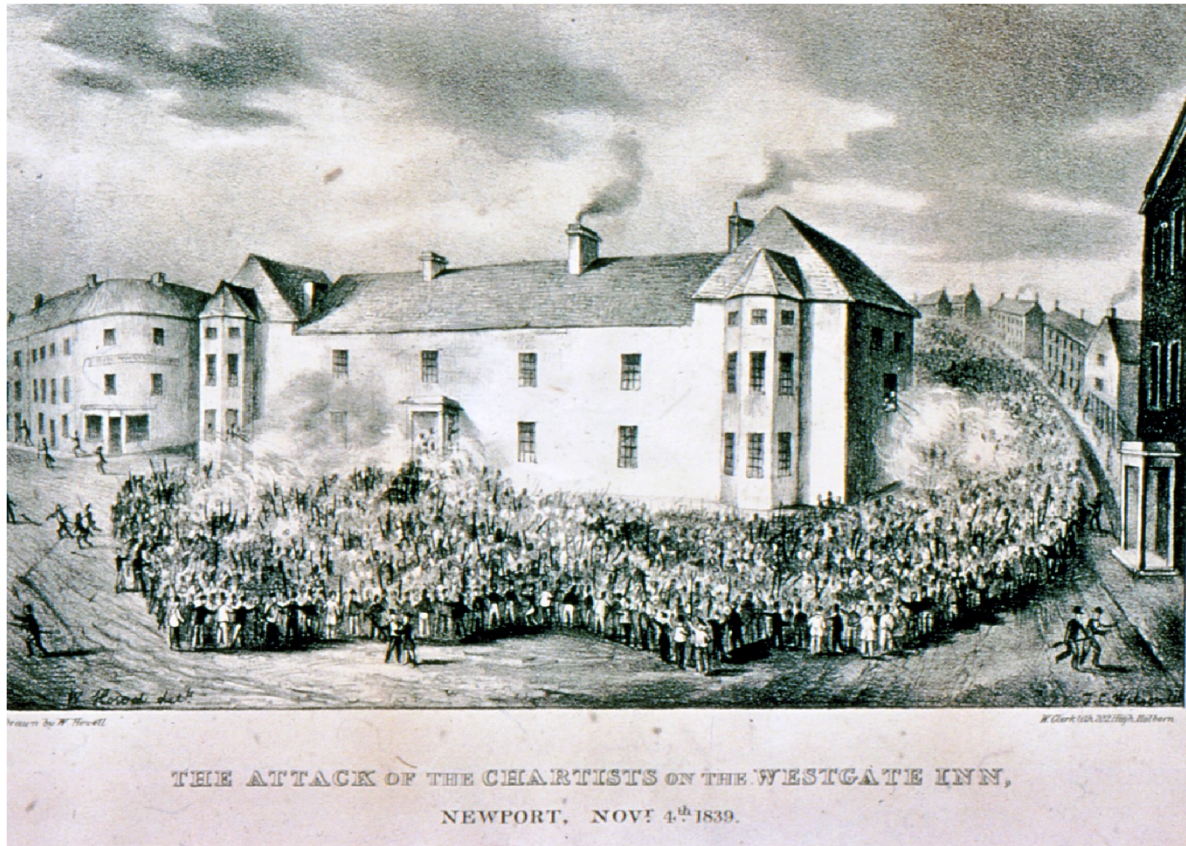
*'When I saw the blood flow,
I ran'*

Monmouthshire's Chartist Uprising of 1839

by

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VIOLENCE AT THE WESTGATE



This contemporary depiction of the Chartist assault on Newport's Westgate Hotel is inaccurate in that defenders are shown firing from windows overlooking Stow Hill. In fact, the twenty-eight soldiers had been packed-into the hotel's front lower left-hand room, well away from the hill, and would have only been brought into action as a last resort. The porch of Mayor Thomas Phillips' house is visible to the right, and Stow Hill's old workhouse at the hill's summit. This was no ambush as is often claimed – had it been intended even the hotel's few infantry could have cut swathes through the crowd, with the larger Old Workhouse garrison killing hundreds more as they fled.

"WHEN I SAW THE BLOOD FLOW, I RAN!"

Nine Chartists fell at the Westgate Hotel on that fateful November day, five within and four outside its walls. Eventually all were carried to the stables where, in spite of treatment by two doctors - special constables present during the affray - none survived.

These were not the only casualties: In the desperate struggle as men cut and thrust in crowded passageways, a 'British Revolution' died also. Had Westgate and Newport been seized, other Chartists throughout the kingdom could have risen, the government been overthrown and a republic declared. Contemporary threats and speeches make it clear that members of aristocratic and middle classes were at risk and that had the attack succeeded Britain would have become a very different nation with its future impact on world affairs severely diminished. The Westgate was no Bastille but, had it fallen, the outcome could have been even more momentous.

Everything turned on the loyalty of twenty-eight soldiers: As his march began John Frost had assured his followers that "*The soldiers at Newport are Chartists to a man – they are only waiting to join us!*" How true these words seemed when Captain Stack's men did nothing as Chartist columns marched past Stow Hill's old workhouse. Nor was a soldier to be seen, as the marchers began their Westgate assault, hacking and firing at its few special constable defenders. For a short while world history hung in the balance.

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

The planned British Revolution was to begin on Monday, November the 4th, 1839, a mere two days after Newport's 'Monmouthshire Merlin' newspaper had declared the government *"entitled to honour and gratitude for the manner in which it had dealt with the recent Chartist crisis"*. 1839 had, so far, proved a momentous year when the rejection of Chartism's much-forged *"Great Petition of a Million Signatures"* had precipitated wide-spread anger, furious meetings, and threats of strikes that made Britain appear on the very edge of revolution. But on that day in November the 'Merlin' appeared ignorant of the fact that, even as its ink dried, a secret army was being readied to attack and seize the town.

(A song reputed have been sung during the march on Newport)

*'The labourer toils and strives the more,
While tyrants are carousing,
But hark! I hear the lions roar,
The British youths are rousing,
The poor men feel the smart, Sir,
But let us break the tyrants' chain,
We soon shall have the Charter!"*

*'Then rouse, my boys, and fight the foe,
Your weapons Truth and Reason,
You will let the Whigs and Tories know,
That thinking is not treason!*

*Ye lords oppose us if you can,
Your own doom you seek after,
With or without you we will stand,
Until we gain the Charter!"*

THE CHARTISTS

In 1836 a group of liberal-minded gentlemen established the "London Workingmen's Association" - Chartism's origins were predominantly middle-class. Those who supported its 'Workers' Charter' became known as 'Chartists'.

At that time few men, and no women, could vote in parliamentary elections. Substantial property-ownership was necessary both to vote or stand as a candidate. Balloting took place in public, and M.P.'s unpaid; even if by some miracle an ordinary working man could be elected it was impossible to maintain himself financially. Political representation would improve matters, and this became Chartism's declared objective. By the end of 1836 the Workingmen's Association was to issue its 'Charter' in which were listed the celebrated 'Six Points'.

The justice of these six demands was recognized by many. All men over the age of twenty-one - women were not considered - should have the right to vote; equally-sized electoral districts would be created, and a secret ballot employed. To enable working-men to enter Parliament, payment of M.P.'s was essential, as was the abolition of property qualification. Only one

demand, i.e. for annual parliaments, would not eventually become part of the British political system.

Chartism spread like wildfire throughout industrial and rural areas of the kingdom to be received at first with enthusiastic acclaim in the Monmouthshire and Glamorgan coalfield.

THE IRON TOWNS.

Between 1800 and 1839 Newport, formerly an unimportant coastal settlement, had developed into the major outlet for Monmouthshire iron and coal, rapidly increasing in size and prosperity. European Wars had created great demand for iron, and furnaces now blazed between Hirwaun and Blaenavon - smoke-blackening skies by day and fire-reddening them by night.

Rich mineral seams rose to the surface along this northern '*outcrop*' with enormous quantities of iron and coal being transported by pack-mule, tramroad and canal to Newport's expanding docks. The iron-making towns of Hirwaun, Rhymney, Tredegar, Sirhowy, Beaufort, Ebbw Vale, Nantyglo and Blaenavon had developed almost overnight; Merthyr Tydfil had become the iron-making capital of the world whose '*Cyfartha Works*' operated by ironmaster Richard Crawshay was the largest single industrial plant yet built. Merthyr had become the largest town in Wales and its Cyfartha, Plymouth, Dowlais and Penydarren works were bringing about the rapid development of Cardiff. Tens of thousands of men, women and children flocked willingly

from all parts of Wales and the border country to this iron Eldorado where work and money were plentiful.

SOCIAL UNREST

Working and living conditions could be harsh for men, women and children serving furnaces, or toiling in iron or coal pits. Pay was generally good but earned in what are now regarded as appalling and dangerous conditions.

Children as young as six were employed, often to open and close underground ventilation doors for twelve hours a day – *'an easy task'*, hazardous only if bitten by rats or falling asleep under tram wheels. Yet, Henry Hughes of Tredegar would later record *'his pride'* at being allowed to do such work – *'I felt I was now a man, able to earn money'*. Older, stronger boys and girls might drag trams in and out of workings too low for ponies, their badge of office a hooked chain and strong leather belt. Eye-witnesses referred to the *'hoof-like'* pads formed on feet, knees, and elbows of those who similarly crawled in the Forest of Dean iron mines.

Young and old worked with white-hot iron that could mutilate and blind; it was estimated men and boys ran eleven miles or more every shift serving rolling-mills. Other youngsters also ran, just as determinedly, between furnace and public house bearing the gallons of beer needed to replace furnace-workers' body fluids; working with white-hot metal created enormous thirsts. If young, fit and strong, good money could be made; if sick, maimed or old, only starvation or the workhouse.

Despite modern-day mythology, most Monmouth and Glamorgan-shire iron and coalworks masters were not all ruthless and despotic men. In a society where rioting and civil disturbance were the norm, relationships between masters and workers depended upon consensus. With no official police force to protect them, iron masters and their families lived amongst their employees; only at Nantyglo did Joseph Bailey feel it necessary to construct Martello-type fortifications near his Ty Mawr home in the belief this turbulent region could become the birthplace of a British Revolution.

Yet, other masters might have wondered at this - Merthyr Tydfil's Richard Crawshay paid his workers in coin, stating that *'If he could have his way all should eat meat and drink beer every day!'* Crawshay employed Robert Raikes to establish Merthyr's first Sunday School, as well as building chapels for his employees, while other masters established free day schools for their workers' children, established libraries, and even distributed free food in times of need. Certainly, there were many faults and abuses, but comparisons with modern-day conditions and attitudes are misleading: the past must be judged only in its own context.

The Outcrop had rapidly acquired an unenviable reputation as safe refuge for criminals and fugitives, being known in adjacent rural areas as *'The land of the Dynion Drwyg'* (Bad Men). Its innate lawlessness was compounded by drunkenness, incidentally a significant cause of work-place accidents. Pay days "The long Draw" were every four weeks or more, in an attempt to limit production losses, and drunken violence that ensued. There is no doubt company 'Truck' or 'Tommy' shops, often abused price and quality - our term 'tommy-rot' recalling those times - but there were masters,

Tredegar's Homfrays' amongst them, who believed the system should be abolished as being '*injurious to working people.*' Housing was generally of a surprisingly good standard, but rapidly expanding settlements outstripped primitive waste disposal methods deemed normal at that time. 'Night soil' dumped on hillsides could pollute the "spouts", i.e. pipes driven into hillside spring-lines to supply drinking water. By mid-century cholera would kill thousands living in teeming settlements amongst glowing heaps of furnace slag.

'Every aspect of daily life was dominated by the great ironworks,' an 1841 'Guide to Merthyr Tydfil' stated:

'The scene at night is beyond conception. The immense fires give a livid hue to the faces of the workmen and cause them to present a ghastly appearance, while the sounds of steam rolling mills and mass hammers worked by machines, or wielded by brawny arms, preclude any possibility of being heard when speaking'.

CHARTISM'S MESSAGE

Few other industrial regions seemed as potentially explosive socially as the Outcrop iron-towns. The Merthyr Tydfil riots of 1831 and the hanging of 'Dic Penderyn' had created a working-class martyr and, by 1839, economic problems and hardship were creating an explosive social powder-keg. In this tumultuous region political agitators found ready listeners and in hundreds of public houses men imbibed radical ideas with their beer. Chapels had at first

supported Chartism but this diminished rapidly when the movement's real aims became clear.

There were those who believed Chartism would bring social change and improvement, but others - predominantly educated middle-class - realized it provided a means by which workers could be organized and manipulated. The American and French Revolutions were recent events, still fresh in many minds: republicanism that would overthrow nobility and monarchy to create some ideal new order attracted many, making a distinction between reform and revolution become blurred.

As Chartism developed, there emerged a clear division between its 'Moral' and 'Physical Force' factions, i.e. the achievement of social change either through persuasion or violent action. Henry Vincent, Chartist emissary to the Monmouthshire Coalfield, was a believer in physical force and republicanism. Superb orator and undoubted revolutionary, he began to influence the coalfield, urging its working men to seek change through violence – '*An avalanche of Chartism would descend upon the aristocracy*' he cried. Travelling throughout the area he whipped his audiences into a frenzy, ending one speech at Newport with the words '*Perish the privileged orders! Death to the aristocracy!*' In May 1839 the authorities reacted, arresting Vincent and others on charges of conspiracy, and housing them in Monmouth gaol. They were too late - the seeds of revolution, had been sown.

THE LEADERS.

Three men, totally different in character and background, dominated the local coalfield. Fine speakers all, able to inspire a crowd - listeners claimed they could '*charm birds out of trees*' - began propagating Chartist ideals.

JOHN FROST

John Frost, Chartism's acknowledged local leader, was a prosperous Newport draper. Although apparently supporting 'Moral Force', i.e. reasoned argument and persuasion, his hidden agenda probably included militant republicanism. Formerly J.P. and Newport's Mayor, his many inflammatory speeches and pamphlets caused him to lose both offices to Thomas Phillips, thereafter his hated enemy. With social status damaged, and rejected by his peers, in bitterness Frost turned to the working-classes for acceptance and approbation. As events gathered pace and innately-republican 'Physical Force' gained ascendance, Frost's continuing leadership must reveal his true beliefs.

ZEPHANIA WILLIAMS

Possibly, the most intriguing leader was Zephania Williams. Intelligent, literate, and prosperous, he acted as Mineral Agent for the Sirhowy Iron Company, as well as owning property and coal-levels in the area. A close friend and confidant of Henry Vincent, Williams quit his secure and well-paid position in 1839 to become inn-keeper at nearby Nantyglo where his 'Royal Oak' public house became centre of militant (and republican?) Chartism. Visited by

Vincent and others, this was where some of the most important planning seems to have taken-place. In the 'Royal Oak' men met and drank under a large painting of Christ Crucified, across which Williams had written '*This is what happened to the man who stole an ass!*'. Atheist, republican and a fiery orator, he appears to have been the most influential local voice as events moved to a climax, and his was the most marked collapse when the venture failed.

WILLIAM JONES

William Jones was leader of the Eastern Valley Chartists, his Pontypool shop headquarters to an organization claiming to have some twelve hundred ex-soldiers amongst its members. A watchmaker by trade, Jones had once joined a band of strolling players, and possessed the ability to hold a crowd. A dedicated Chartist and believer in reform through republicanism, Jones' good looks, rich voice and fine delivery, could sway any audience. Although sometimes criticised as the weakest leader, William Jones displayed courage when facing what appeared to be imminent death.

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