THE BRISTOL RIOTS

by SUSAN THOMAS

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The Bristol Riots is the thirty-fourth pamphlet published by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association. Miss Thomas is not primarily concerned with giving a detailed account of the Riots but with analysing what lay behind them, and she presents an interpretation which differs from the one usually given.

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The Branch hopes in the course of the next twelve months to publish pamphlets on John Wesley in Bristol, on Bristol and the Abolition of Slavery, and on the establishment of the Bristol Constabulary.

Eight of the pamphlets in this series have now appeared in book form under the title of *Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, edited by Patrick McGrath, and published by David and Charles at £3.75.

A full list of publications is given on the inside back cover. The pamphlets can be obtained from most Bristol book sellers, from the Porters' Lodge in the Wills Memorial Building and in the Senate House, or direct from Mr. Peter Harris, 74 Bell Barn Road, Stoke Bishop, Bristol, 9. Readers are asked to help the work by placing a standing order for future productions.

The Bristol Riots

by SUSAN THOMAS

In 1831, Bristol suffered the worst outbreak of urban rioting since the Gordon Riots in London over fifty years earlier. Twelve rioters were officially declared to have died as a result of confrontations with troops and special constables, and many more unidentifiable corpses were discovered among the ruins of the burned out buildings. The whole nation was scandalized by the extent of the destruction. In three days of looting and burning, a large part of the centre of the city was laid waste, and over £60,000 was eventually paid out in compensation for damage to private property alone. Worst hit was the area around Queen Square: private dwellings along two sides of the Square were plundered and burned down, while in Prince's Street and King Street the extreme heat caused the pavement above the bonded cellars to crack open and nearby warehouses crumbled in ruins into the streets. Many important civic buildings were also destroyed, notably the Mansion House, Excise Office and Custom House in Queen Square, and the Toll Houses by the river. Prisoners were liberated from gaols and debtors' lock-up houses all over the city before the rioters set fire to the Bridewell, the New Gaol and the Gloucester County Gaol at Lawford's Gate. Even the traditional residence of the Bishop of Bristol, the Palace on Lower College Green, was gutted and then razed to the ground. At the height of the riot, the glow from the fires could be seen as far away as Newport.[1]

Little attention, however, has been paid to these events by historians, who have been content to dismiss the Bristol Riots as just another manifestation of the excitement generated by the House of Lords' rejection of the Reform Bill. But Bristol was a city which already boasted two Members of Parliament elected

1. For a detailed description of the Riots, see W. H. Somerton. *A Narrative of the Bristol Riots*, Bristol, 1831.

on an unusually wide franchise, and which stood to gain comparatively little from the controversial Bill. It therefore seems improbable that the anger which inspired Bristol's 'respectable' citizens to stand back and watch the destruction of some of the finest and most prestigious buildings in the city can be attributed solely to their concern for Parliamentary Reform. There is also a problem of timing. For while there was spontaneous rioting in Nottingham and Derby within days of the rejection of the Bill, the huge pro-Reform meetings held in Bristol at that time passed off without incident; the violent scenes did not occur until over three weeks later. And if it was primarily a 'Reform Riot', it is difficult to explain why the targets of mob attack did not include the homes or meeting-places of the anti-Reformist faction in the city, and why the Mayor of Bristol, himself a known Reformer, was unable to bring his influence to bear on the excited populace.

It was abundantly clear both to the Corporation and to the populace that Sir Charles Wetherell's arrival in the city on Saturday 29 October, would provoke a demonstration of public disapproval. As Recorder of Bristol, Wetherell was due to pay this routine visit to the city to preside over the Court of Assizes, but his recent assertions in the House of Commons that Bristol no longer favoured Reform and that a "reaction" had taken place there had made him extremely unpopular with the local citizens. They were angry that Wetherell, whose connexion with Bristol was essentially a legal one, should have presumed himself better qualified than their own elected representatives to make public statements about the political allegiance of the city. They were aware, too, that this crusader against Reform was himself the Member of Parliament for Boroughbridge in Yorkshire, a seat which the Reform Bill sought to abolish. The crowds which turned out to insult the Recorder were therefore determined to demonstrate, both to him and to the nation, that Bristol had remained faithful to the Whig ministry and its Reform Bill.

Rioting was still fairly common in Bristol at times of great political excitement. In 1810, another unpopular Recorder, Sir Vicary Gibbs, had been given a stormy reception by the populace, and the windows of all the main civic buildings were smashed in the ensuing riot. At election-time, too, a drunken mob would invariably attack the house of the less fortunate candidate: Under-Sheriff Hare claimed that "there has never been a contested election in my time at Bristol in which that ceremony has

not formed a part."[1] The mob which greeted Wetherell should have presented no greater threat than usual, but on this occasion, the sheer incompetence of the Magistracy, the antagonism which developed between the civil and military authorities, and the unprecedented refusal of Bristol's middle-class citizens to police the city all combined to render the traditional procedures for maintaining order totally unworkable.

The security arrangements were clearly inadequate. The time and place of Wetherell's ceremonial entry into the city were changed, but this precaution rapidly became public knowledge and large crowds were waiting for him when he boarded the carriage at Totterdown. It was apparently not considered necessary to safeguard the traditional objects of mob attack or to plan an overall strategy for the defence of the city, although evidence produced afterwards indicated that both the Bridewell and the New Gaol were relatively easy to defend. There was no initial attempt, either to alert the three hundred pensioners, the half-pay officers or the local troops of Yeomanry.

With less than a hundred regular constables in the whole city, untrained 'special' constables had to be recruited. Hare, with all his experience of Bristol mobs, calculated that some three hundred would be sufficient to control the crowd, but he recognised that a reliable force could only be created if regular constables enlisted their friends and neighbours. Failing this, "if they got their own workmen and employed them they would still have the same sort of organisation." In the event, however, the widespread refusal of the 'respectable' classes to volunteer their services led to the hiring of 119 men who owed no such loyalty and who were widely regarded as 'bludgeon men'. The Mayor, Charles Pinney, was aware of this and warned them "not to go out in a body . . . because it would have an effect like an intimidation over the mob." Hostility towards the 'specials' mounted rapidly on the Saturday afternoon as people watched their violent and indiscriminate sallies into the crowd, and one rioter died as a result of blows dealt him by the constables in Queen Square. Besides being a provocation to the crowd, the motley force was so disorganised as to be largely ineffective. One constable claimed that "there were no orders for them to stay or to go", and men therefore left their posts of their own accord, often when their presence was crucial. The usefulness of this force was also limited because it was rarely deployed in concert with the troops, and when it was, the lack of discipline among

1. *Trial of Charles Pinney*, edit. Gutch and Martin, Bristol, 1832, p. 253.

the special constables only led to friction between themselves and the soldiers. An angry constable later complained that a Dragoon had prevented him from using force to recover stolen property from a rioter: "I struck him first of all with my sword and then got hold of him, and a soldier said, 'You have already been told to put up that weapon — I desire you to put it up immediately or I will cut you down'."[1]

The troops had been sent to Bristol at the request of the magistrates, who were alarmed at their inability to recruit a dependable civil force. Lord Melbourne had reluctantly agreed to provide ninety-three Dragoons, but he insisted that they be quartered out of sight and used only "in case of absolute emergency." After his meeting with the Home Secretary, Alderman Fripp wrote to the Mayor, "I need hardly add that secrecy upon this point is essential; if it should be known that we have applied for this aid it may induce people to organise in a dangerous way."[2] Fripp's warning was a sound one, for when news of this deal leaked out the magistrates found themselves in an even weaker position. When, on the Saturday morning, the mob discovered that troops were stationed in the Cattle Market, it certainly appeared to many people as though the authorities had planned a confrontation.

It was also unfortunate that the magistrates were sent two troops of the 14th Light Dragoons, a regiment known for its part in putting down riots throughout the West Country as the 'Bloody Blues'. By the Sunday morning the regiment seemed to have earned this sobriquet because a rioter, Stephen Bush, had been shot dead the previous night. From this time. it became increasingly dangerous to keep the 14th on duty: their distinctive uniforms ensured that they were singled out for the opprobrium of the crowd, while the 3rd Dragoon Guards continued to be hailed by the rioters as deliverers and sympathisers. Junior officers described how the same crowd had greeted the arrival of the 3rd with cheering and then welcomed the 14th with "groans and hisses and cries of 'pull them off their horses!' "[3]

The popularity of the 3rd Dragoon Guards, however, did not make it any easier for them to control the crowd. The troop had been based in Bristol for purposes of recruitment and it is probable that many of the soldiers identified with the grievances of the rioters. Similar accusations were also levelled at their com-

1. *Trial of Charles Pinney*, pp. 326, 254. 49 & 50.
2. Bristol University Library: *Pinney Papers* S-2, Fripp to Pinney, 20 Oct., 1831.
3. *Court-martial on Lieut-Col Brereton*, pub. W. H. Somerton, Bristol, 1832, Fourth day of evidence.

manding officer, Lieut. Col. Brereton, who had lived in the city for several years and who was therefore likely to have been involved in local affairs; when asked by a rioter if he was for Reform, he is reported to have said "I am, as well as you, my boys." Certainly some of Brereton's staff, recruited locally, were sympathetic to the cause: one, Captain Hodges, had been a prominent spokesman at public Reform meetings in the city.

The soldiers' task was made even more difficult by the timidity of the magistrates, who refused to make the traditional display of authority by riding out at the head of the troops. In 1793, during the Bristol Toll-bridge riots, the Mayor, the Sheriff and five aldermen had accompanied the troops, to the sound of fifes and drums, but on this occasion, not one of the aldermen observed such a show of solidarity. On the Monday morning Major Beckwith arrived from Gloucester with reinforcements of over a hundred 14th Dragoon Guards and requested the magistrates to ride with them into the city, only to be told that "none of them knew how to ride except one gentleman and they pointed at the tall alderman . . . Mr. Hilhouse said that he had not been on horseback for eighteen years and he would hold anybody responsible who said a second time that he could ride."[1] They were afraid to make a public appearance in case it increased their unpopularity and incited the mob to destroy their own shipping and warehouses in the city centre.

Pinney seems to have been the only magistrate who was not preoccupied with thoughts of his own safety, but even he was compromised by the cowardice of his friends. When on the Sunday night, at the height of the riot, Pinney was obliged to take refuge in Daniel Fripp's house in Berkeley Square, Fripp secretly instructed the Mayor's messengers not to reveal to anyone where he was staying. This caused untold confusion at the military headquarters and gave rise to rumours that the Mayor had deserted his command. Fripp, however, was not alone in his fear that the mob might search out Pinney: his neighbours evacuated their house when they learned that the Mayor was next door.

The incompetence of both civil and military authorities was under-lined by their failure to establish a common headquarters during the Riot: Brereton used the Recruiting Office on College Green, while the civic officers engaged in what the *Bristol Liberal* called "the game of hide-and-seek between the Council House, College Green and Berkeley Square . . ." Colonel Brereton was understandably confused by the succession of temporary head-

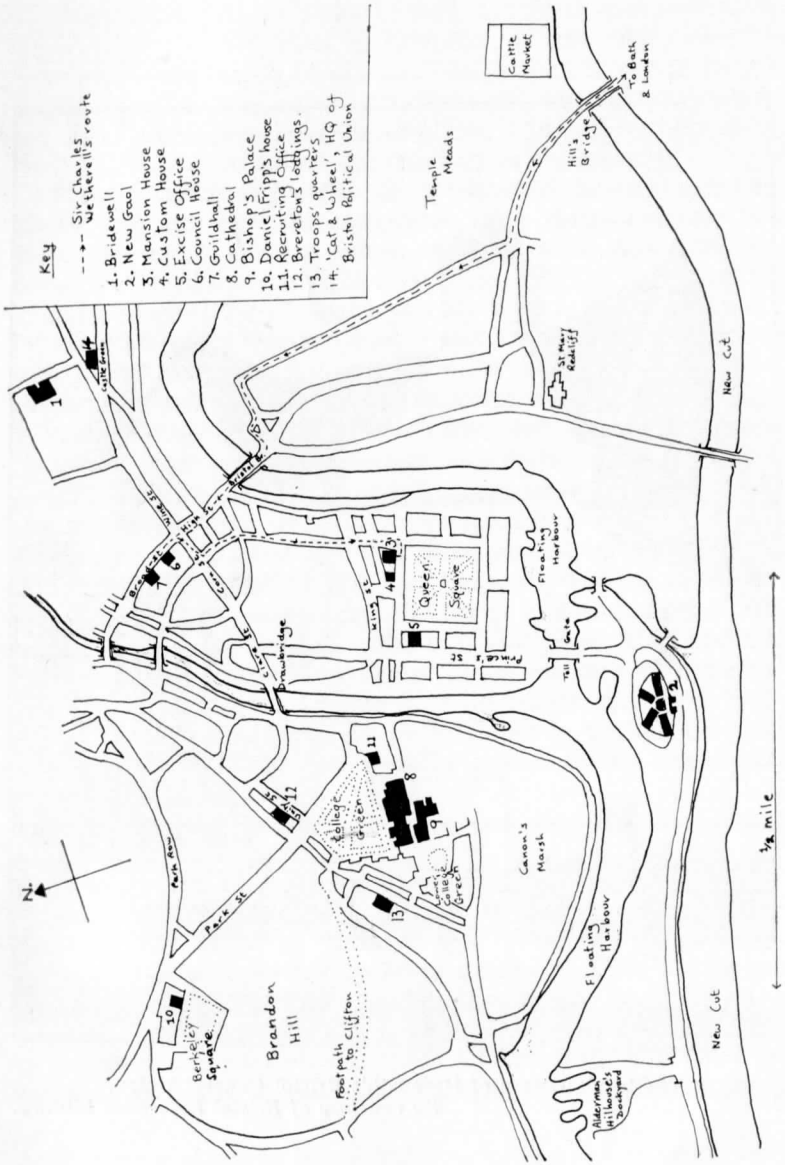
1. Public Records Office: H.O. 40/28. Major Beckwith to Lord Melbourne, 1 Nov. 1831.

quarters, and at critical moments was unable to find a magistrate. This had especially grave consequences on the Sunday night when Captain Codrington arrived unannounced with fifty-seven men of the Dodington Yeomanry, reinforcements which were desperately needed in view of the widespread destruction then taking place in the city. Pinney learned of their arrival and signed orders for billets, but these never reached Brereton as the courier was unable to locate him; meanwhile Brereton and Codrington were equally unsuccessful in their quest for a magistrate. The Dodington troop was eventually taken to Fishers' Repository to be quartered, but what exactly took place there remains unclear. Codrington evidently felt slighted by Brereton's attitude and by the unprofessional reception which his troop had been given, for he withdrew his force from the city, protesting angrily to Brereton, "This is too bad — I will not be humbugged in this manner any longer!" [1]

Other vital messages went astray: Pinney's letter to the 'commanding officer', dated 3 a.m. Monday, directing him to quell the riot immediately, never reached Brereton. The letter was delivered to Captain Warrington, a junior officer in the 3rd Dragoon Guards, who, assuming mistakenly that the couriers would continue to Brereton's lodgings with the message, neither communicated the order to his senior officer nor acted upon that order himself. A previous letter giving the address where Pinney was to be found had failed to reach either Brereton or Warrington, and as a result of this double misunderstanding Warrington waited in vain for some order from his superior, while his ignorance of the Mayor's whereabouts prevented him from seeking further instructions from the civil authorities. He was heard to observe at the time that "there was a great screw loose somewhere." [2] Warrington was afterwards court-martialled and cashiered for his indecision, although Major Beckwith testified at the trial that "Captain Warrington was paralysed by the imbecility and misconduct of those who ought to have directed him."

The troops were not deployed effectively during the riots because both Pinney and Brereton consistently refused to take the responsibility for giving them clear and definite orders. Legally, the Mayor and magistrates were "bound to witness with their own eyes that riot, before they called upon any one soldier to fire — or upon any officer to give that command," but Pinney

1. *Trial of Charles Pinney* p. 177. For Brereton's version of this incident, see H.O. 40/28 Brereton to Melbourne, 31 Oct 1831.
2. *Court-martial on Captain Warrington,* pub. W. H. Somerton, Bristol 1832, p. 5.



Bristol at the time of the Riot.

The headquarters of Herapath's Bristol General Union.
By courtesy of Bristol Reference Library.

was seriously hampered by the refusal of his fellow aldermen to share the burden of these decisions. When asked to give the order to fire, he is reported to have said, "No — all my other acts have been acts in council—hold a council and determine the point and I shall have no hesitation to give the order." [1] This they would not do. And when Pinney then turned to Brereton for a professional assessment of the situation, he was merely told that "the responsibility is with you, I protest against using force . . . it is unnecessary and contrary to my opinion."

Pinney found it impossible to work with his commanding officer: only two days before the riot, Hare visited Brereton because "there had been a doubt expressed as to the authority which the sheriffs had a right to exercise over the troops, and I was apprehensive . . ." Hare's anxiety was to prove justifiable, for the relationship between Pinney and Brereton was characterised by mistrust. They both exploited the ambiguous division of authority in order to avoid taking decisions which each felt ought to have proceeded from the other. Pinney only urged Brereton to "take the most vigorous, effective and decisive means" in his power "to quell the existing riot", and there was no guarantee that this vague order would have protected Brereton from criminal charges in the event of undue bloodshed.[2] Ludlow, the Town Clerk, admitted that Brereton had frequently insisted that "if I am to fire, I must have an explicit order," and he conceded that, as far as he knew, no such order was ever given. Undoubtedly, Brereton felt the need for restraint as the memory of 'Peterloo' was still fresh, and the behaviour of the troops during the Tollbridge riots was not likely to be forgotten in Bristol. On that occasion, soldiers had fired into the crowd, killing eleven and wounding fifty-one.

Brereton's only decisive action during the riots was highly controversial as it deprived the city of over half its military force at a time when the violence was escalating dangerously. For on the Sunday morning, in spite of fierce opposition from the civil authorities, he removed the 14th Light Dragoons to Keynsham because he had received assurances from the rioters that they would disperse if the 'Blues' were sent away. Brereton claimed, "My situation was a peculiarly distressing one, between an overpowering infuriated mob and a Magistracy from whom no essential aid could be procured . . . to have attempted anything

1. MS correspondence in Bristol Reference Library MS. B 24936: John Ham to Francis Place, 5 Sept 1835.
2. *Trial of Charles Pinney*, pp. 257 & 173.

against the mob at that moment would have been putting too much at hazard . . ."[1] Although he was severely criticised for having 'bargained' with the mob, he had good reason to be concerned about the soldiers of the 14th who had been on duty for over twenty-four hours and who were being victimised by the crowd. But the withdrawal of the 14th achieved nothing: the rioters perceived that they could now continue their activities with relative impunity and the small remaining force of 3rd Dragoon Guards could only look on helplessly as the Gaols and other public buildings were destroyed.

Brereton made other important errors of judgement. He undermined his own authority by constantly exaggerating both the strength of the crowd and the weakness of his troops, and by the Monday morning he had abandoned even the pretence of maintaining his position as commanding officer. He told Beckwith that it would be dangerous to attempt to clear the streets, and that "If you do so, it is on your own responsibility."[2] Though junior to him in rank, Beckwith consequently assumed control of his troops and organised the restoration of order, assisted by Major Mackworth, aide-de-camp to Lord Hill, who had been dispatched to the city to keep the War Office informed of events there. Brereton's curious behaviour will probably remain a mystery for his court-martial was only in its preliminary stages when he committed suicide. Just before he took his life, he offered to alter his plea to 'guilty' provided that the Court agreed to pass sentence straight away without calling further witnesses. His request was turned down.[3]

The reluctance of both civil and military officers to take the initiative must be attributed partly to their lack of experience. Brereton, who had seen service in the tropics and as a local recruiting officer, had never before been involved in crowd control; Warrington had been in charge of his troop only fifteen months and was described by Dalbiac as an "inexperienced young man"; and neither Codrington nor his troop had been on active service before. Pinney was elected Mayor only six weeks before the riots without having ever served as an alderman, and having been absent on his West India estates until shortly before the civic elections.

However, the inexperience of the men in command would not normally have been exposed, for the magistrates of Bristol had always been able to rely upon the assistance of the propertied

1. H.O. 40/28. Brereton to Melbourne, 3 Nov. 1831.
2. *Trial of Charles Pinney*, p. 187.
3. W.O. 71/280. Letter from Brereton's lawyer to the War Office. 8 Feb 1832.

classes whenever the peace and order of the city was threatened. But on this occasion the problem presented by plunderers and incendiarists was compounded by the thousands of onlookers who "protected the rioters by their countenance, their presence and their shouts." Unlike the rioters, these sympathetic observers included merchants, professional men and tradesmen; Under-Sheriff Hare told the Court that "the crowd surrounding was of all classes, respectable, well-dressed people — the actual agents in the mischief were the lowest." Another witness, describing the crowd which gathered on Brandon Hill to shout abuse at the troops, claimed that "the gentlemen had silk umbrellas over their heads, and the females had silk cloaks and pelisses."[1] Not unnaturally, neither Liberal nor Tory propaganda admitted that the rioters had received this encouragement from the 'respectable' classes. The Liberals valued their respectability too highly to risk portraying their supporters as law-breakers, while the Tories would not admit that Bristol's citizens could have held their magistrates in such contempt.

Not only did the citizens refuse to enrol as constables before the riot, but they still withheld their support on the Sunday when the magistrates attempted to muster a civilian force in the Guildhall. After escaping over the rooftops from the blazing Mansion House, Pinney called on 'respectable' persons living nearby to enlist their help, and ordered notices to be read out in churches and chapels calling upon loyal members of the public to come forward and form a posse comitatus. But fewer than two hundred citizens attended the rally, and many of them left when they realised that the civic authorities were too incompetent even to organise this small force effectively. People waited about for hours without any constructive decision being taken: one gentleman complained that "there was nothing determined upon and there was a great deal of confusion in the hall . . . The Mayor said that the best advice he could give was that each person should go home and take care of his own property". From time to time, the chaotic meeting was interrupted by people reporting on the destruction which was taking place in the city, but the magistrates were at a total loss as to what to recommend. When they heard that the Bridewell was in the hands of the rioters, they merely replied, "You say they have released the prisoners—pooh! pooh! There will be nothing more done", and the Governor of the New Gaol was told, "You are to use your

1. *Trial of Charles Pinney*, pp. 203, 261 & 334.

own discretion as to the prison, but mind, the Magistracy gives you no direction".[1]

Pinney was, in fact, one of the few civic officers to acquit himself well during the riots. But he found himself in an impossible situation, paralysed by the incompetence of his colleagues and isolated by the bitter political feud then raging in the city. For he was clearly compromised by his position as a declared Reformer among Tory aldermen. Indeed, it is worth speculating why he was ever elected Mayor; it is just conceivable that, in anticipation of trouble, the aldermen had sensed the vulnerability of their political exclusiveness, and had therefore opted for a Whig Mayor, who could give the impression that the Corporation was politically unbiased, and who would also be an ideal scapegoat should the Corporation be called upon to account for its actions. Certainly Pinney's own family feared that this was the case, as did Ham who wrote that "the Corporation wished to throw upon the Mayor the onus of quelling what they called a Reform riot". Pinney suffered also because he appeared to his former supporters to have abandoned his principles in accepting the Mayoralty, and he therefore found himself in a "trying and singular position . . . as a mark for the fire of both sides".[2] He had attempted to maintain an appearance of political neutrality after he became Mayor by refraining from any public show of support for the Reformers, but because of this he was popularly regarded as having 'ratted'. On the termination of his year in office, a Radical newspaper carried the following notice: "No man ever entered the Mayoralty with brighter prospects . . . he was a professed Reformer . . . but he deserted the people, he truckled to the Tories".[3] This sense of betrayal was probably the main reason why Pinney was unable to rely on the loyalty of the citizens at a time when it was so desperately needed.

The part played by the Bristol Political Union, once rioting had broken out, has been variously interpreted. The Union leaders were clearly gratified that the Magistracy was unable to cope with the situation, but in withholding their assistance until the riot had got completely out of hand, they were being no more obstructive than the majority of their fellow-citizens.

1. *Ibid.* pp. 131, 138, & 100-1.
2. Pinney Papers R-5. F. Smith to M. Ames, Pinney's sister. 1 Nov 1831.
3. Pinney Papers S2: *Bristol Free Reporter*, 29 Sept 1832. See also the letters from the Radical Frederick Jones to Pinney, dated 7 Oct and 20 Oct 1831, and bound in the scrapbook *Troubles in Bristol by Politicks, Fire and Pestilence*, Bristol Reference Library, B10112.

It was the refusal of the magistrates to make any positive show of strength which fostered the rumour that the Union had taken control of the city, and which prompted people to tear down Corporation notices while those issued by the Union were read with respect. The Union, accepting the role that had been cast for it, then attempted to intervene on its own authority to quell the violence. On the Sunday afternoon, hearing that the prisons were being attacked, William Herapath, Vice-President of the Union, led his members to the New Gaol. Ham claimed that they were challenged by the rioters, and ". . . No sooner was the answer given, 'Council of the Union', than a passage was immediately made for them . . . and they ceased their operations and listened attentively to all the members had to say".[1] But even Herapath's oratory failed to deter the rioters from naming their next targets—the banks, the Dock gates on the Cumberland Basin and the three Tollhouses on Prince's Street Bridge, at the Wells and at St. Philips.

That evening, with Queen Square, the Bishop's Palace and the city gaols all in flames, Herapath offered the Union as an independent peace-keeping force, but Pinney realised that it would be political suicide to allow the Union to act in an official capacity, and therefore replied that he "could not accept the services of the Union or acknowledge them as a body".[2] It was not until the Monday, when troops had dispersed most of the rioters and the magistrates had regained control of the city, that Hare felt it safe to employ 400 members of the Union at the rate of 3s 6d a day to patrol the streets.

But whatever the contribution of the Union, it was the belated decision of all respectable citizens to make a show of support for the forces of law and order that was mainly responsible for the speedy restoration of peace on the Monday. The excesses of the previous night, especially the attacks on private houses, had finally succeeded in converting the hostile neutrality of the middle classes into a reluctant acceptance of the need to help defend the city, and as a result nearly three thousand people enlisted in the posse comitatus. Mackworth later insisted that the ninety-three Dragoons never had a real

1. Bristol Reference Library: Ham to Place, op cit. 10 Aug 1835.
2. British Mus. Add. MS. 27790: *The Bristol Riots* by Francis Place, pp. 149-50. This unpublished narrative is based upon the Union's own official account of its part in the riots, a document which has not survived.

hope of containing the riot until the majority of the citizens had abandoned their passive protest. Ironically, the riot was virtually over by the time the Home Office had awoken to the full implications of the violence in Bristol and sent hundreds of soldiers, under General Sir Richard Jackson, to the city.

It was widely believed in Bristol that the riots had been deliberately allowed to get out of hand in order that some political advantage might be gained. The Tories suspected the Whig Government of having sent insufficient aid so that the Corporation would be discredited if law and order broke down, while it appeared to many Reformers that "the Corporation clearly wished for just so much violence as to bring Reform into bad odour, but they had no power to say "so far shalt thou go but no further!"[1] Although both of these allegations are indicative of Bristol's political sensitivity at that time, they are of course without foundation. What was certain, however, was that Wetherell's visit brought out into the open a local political conflict which had been intensifying in the city during the previous few weeks. Wetherell himself merely provided the issue over which the opposition chose to make a stand: they made it clear to the whole city that the Corporation's claim to represent the people of Bristol would be judged on its ability to handle the visit of the unpopular Recorder. The refusal of the 'respectable' classes to help control the riot was thus an emphatic rejection of a city government which had become totally alienated from its subjects, having ruled for decades without either consulting or considering them.

The Royal Commission on Municipal Corporations wrote of Bristol in 1833 that "the ruling principle of the Corporation appears to have been at all times the desire of power, the watchful jealousy that nothing should be undertaken within the limits of the city over which they cannot, at pleasure, exercise control". Like many Corporations, Bristol's was self-electing, secretive, inaccessible and extravagant; it supported a large number of absentee officials and was negligent of its civic duties. But its political exclusiveness and its endless conflicts with influential citizens over the state of trade, the management of local charities and the imposition of a county-rate, had made the Bristol Corporation exceptionally vulnerable at a time of crisis.

1. Bristol Reference Library: Ham to Place, 10 Aug. 1835.

During the decade preceding the riot, the Corporation tended to limit membership to a restricted social group, and an overwhelming preponderance on the Common Council of wealthy Tory, Anglican West India merchants considerably narrowed the support on which it had hitherto been able to rely.[1] For Bristol was a city with a strong Dissenting tradition and its many businessmen of modest wealth were already piqued by the way in which their right, as freemen, to a vote in Corporate proceedings, had lapsed. For fifteen years, not a single Whig was created Alderman, and apart from Pinney, only one other Reformer became Mayor between 1820 and 1852. The few Whigs, notably the Pinney and Protheroe families, who remained on the Common Council by 1829, tended to belong to the West India 'aristocracy': as Somerton observed, "To be wealthy and a Tory is to be one of the elect by divine right. To be wealthy and a Whig is to be one of the elect by courtesy".

Bristol also became notorious for its lack of essential public services. The authorities refused to countenance schemes for local improvements unless they could be financed by an increase in the already high level of taxation, and this in turn provoked a demand for municipal accounts to be published. It was widely supposed that Corporation revenue was spent solely on allowances for local dignitaries and public officers, litigation against citizens and in the purchase of large properties "for objects unknown to their fellow citizens". An anonymous pamphleteer insisted that "There is no reasonable doubt that the public disposable funds of the Corporation are ample to provide a resident and paid Magistracy, a vigorous and effective police, and other public benefits for the city, by which her honour and advantage would be far better consulted than the pageants now displayed".[2]

As citizens increasingly lost confidence in the ability of the Corporation to govern the city, they began to organise a coherent opposition. The prestige of the Corporation was not enhanced

1. See *The Old and the New: The Corporation of Bristol* 1820-51 by G. W. A. Bush, Ph.D. thesis, Bristol, 1965.
2. *A few facts relating to the present local government of Bristol and hints for its probable improvement by An Inhabitant,* Bristol, 1831.

by the large number of actions it was forced to bring against merchants who collectively withheld payment of 'unjust' taxes, and against pamphleteers and newspaper editors who persisted in exposing the corruption of corporate officials. But more important was the decision in 1823 by prominent merchants who were alarmed by the stagnation of Bristol's trade and by the refusal of the Corporation to reduce the prohibitive port-dues to form a 'Chamber of Commerce, Trade and Manufacture for the Removal of objects tending to Prevent the Increase of Trade'. This body was recognised as a direct threat to the authority of the Corporation-controlled Dock Company, and its leading figures continued to operate at the forefront of various anti-Corporation and pro-Reform movements right down to the time of the riot.

Even in 1831, when most of the Corporation's opponents became actively involved in the campaign for Parliamentary Reform, their overriding concern was still to reform their own city government, but the continuing importance of local issues has been somewhat obscured by the political realignments which took place at that time. During the 1820s, opposition had been broadbased: it was a Tory merchant, Henry Bush, who in 1828 fought a court-case with the Corporation over port-dues, and it was the High Tory newspaper, *Felix Farley,* which led both the controversy over the dues and the attack on the mode of election to the Corporation. But in 1831, party allegiances in the city became more rigid, reflecting the way in which the Reform question had polarised the Whig and Tory parties throughout the nation, and the journal which had so recently published Gutch's invective against closed corporations accordingly aligned itself behind the Magistracy throughout the troubles of 1831 and 1832.

In May 1831, when Protheroe and Baillie swept the polls on an election budget of £200, the cheapest ever known in Bristol, it was evident that the great majority of citizens favoured Reform, and the Corporation automatically became identified with the opposition to the Bill. The development of two powerful pressure groups in the city, the Reform Committee and the Political Union, was therefore regarded as a serious challenge to the authority of the Corporation.

The Reform Committee was formed on 23 April, 1831 to

"secure the election of such representatives for the city, as will pledge themselves to support his Majesty's ministers in giving effect to the Reform Bill".[1] Its members were wealthy merchants and businessmen who had always played a prominent role in city affairs, generally in opposition to the Corporation. Their anxiety not to sacrifice their respectability ensured that it was never a 'popular' organisation in the sense that the Bristol Political Union was. Most Reform Committee members were motivated by a sense of frustration at their exclusion from any share in the government of the city, and after the riot they lost no time in organising themselves into a Committee of Enquiry which set out to purge the discredited Corporation. The partiality of this body was undeniable: the chairman resigned because "their object really appeared to me more that of persecuting the magistrates than of entering into the general enquiry".[2] And Manchee, who had once declared at a public meeting that "Corporations are too apt to tread people under, and it is time for them to be interfered with", wrote to Melbourne on behalf of the Committee advising him of the need for a stipendary Magistracy, an elective system of Corporate officials, and an annual audit of municipal accounts.[3] Indeed, once the riot was over, the issue of Parliamentary Reform was completely overshadowed by attempts to overhaul the Corporation, and many of those who had been associated with the Reform Committee and subsequently with the Committee of Enquiry were eventually elected onto the new city Council.

While it is impossible to ascertain the numbers of those who attended the open meetings organised by the Reform Committee, it is clear that they were well supported and the prominence on the Committee of newspaper proprietors and editors ensured that its activities were well-publicised and extensively reported.

Eagles and other anti-Reformers claimed that these occasions provided an arena for "agitation by Revolutionist-Reformers, Press and Demagogues", but speeches made at the meetings were never particularly inflammatory. Once the Bristol Political Union had been formed, the more radical Reformers identified with that body rather than with the Committee. Ham wrote that none of the "other Reformers in Bristol, moving in the

1. *Bristol Gazette*, 27 April 1831.
2. *Trial of Charles Pinney*, p. 353.
3. *Bristol Gazette*, 26 Jan 1831.

same scale of society as William Herapath and myself, would join us—all were opposed to the Union as too Revolutionary".

The Tory press portrayed the Political Union as "a secret tribunal—an Inquisition" and as "the Directory", and accused it of keeping its membership secret: "meetings are held at which members . . . attend in masks".[1] The Union's association with its counterpart in Birmingham, its regular meetings at the 'Cat and Wheel' in Castle Green, and its strict code of conduct were all viewed with great alarm. Membership appears to have been tightly controlled and while an initial attempt to restrict admission to householders failed, there is no indication that the Union recruited from social groups below that of the artisan. Its officers were professional men like Herapath, Ham and J. G. Powell.[2] The Union had developed from a 'General Union of Trades' which had been formed before the 1831 election to campaign for the Reformist candidates, and discussion of wages or 'combinations' was specifically prohibited. When it was founded on 7 June, 1831, the Union defined its purpose as the "mutual protection of those mechanics who might suffer from voting conscientiously—to keep a watchful eye on the conduct of the representatives of this city in Parliament," and the Union leaders continued to maintain an intimate link with Protheroe, their newly elected Radical M.P. Through him they were kept informed of both Government and Corporation affairs. Like the Reform Committee, the Union was primarily concerned with local grievances. At the inaugural meeting, J. G. Powell declared, "that our principal efforts ought to be against Corporation abuses . . . that the Corporation received annually £40,000 although only £20,000 was given in as the amount to the Commissioners",[3] and the Union was committed to "enquire into the appropriation of the funds of the respective charities, with a view to prevent their perversion to corrupt and party purposes".[4]

The nationwide excitement over the Reform Bill thus provided an ideal atmosphere for the growth of pressure-groups

1. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 12 Nov 1831.
2. Herapath belonged to an old and respected Bristol family and was Professor of Chemistry and Toxicology at the Bristol Medical School.
3. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 4 June 1831.
4. *Bristol Mercury*, 14 June 1831. See also H.O. 40/28, *Rules and Orders of the Bristol General Union*, Bristol, 1831.

which had their own leadership and organisation, held huge public meetings, issued posters and handbills, were supported by four out of the five Bristol newspapers, and which, in effect, had a better claim than the constituted authorities to represent the interests of the inhabitants of Bristol. Both the Reform Committee and the Political Union therefore stood to gain from a popular disturbance which would bring the weakened Corporation into further disrepute.

During the week following the Lords' rejection of the Bill, a succession of pro-Reform meetings were held. The Union met in Queen Square on 10 October, attended by "a large concourse of the labouring classes",[1] when it was recommended that "the Birmingham Political Union be requested immediately to call a meeting of delegates from other Unions to deliberate on the best means of simultaneous action",[2] and it assembled again the next day, on Bedminster Down to recruit new members. This was followed on the 12th by a huge public meeting called by the Reform Committee in Queen Square, which opened with cheers for the Ministers and the King, and groans for Davis, the ousted Tory M.P. for Bristol, Sir Charles Wetherell and the "forty bigoted and interested majority". But despite the excitement in the city, order was maintained.

However, as the prospect of Wetherell's visit loomed nearer, the Political Union appears to have deliberately undermined the precarious peace of the city. On the 18th, it was involved in the disruption of a meeting called by Lieutenant Claxton and twenty-one "Masters of Vessels" on board the *Earl of Liverpool* to persuade local sailors to form a bodyguard for Wetherell on his forthcoming visit. The meeting was forcibly broken up, and immediately afterwards the sailors found themselves involved in an *ad hoc* quayside meeting of the Political Union, where they signed a resolution "that the sailors of this port . . . will not allow themselves to be made a cat's paw of by the Corporation or its paid agents".[3]

On the 24th, serious rioting nearly broke out again when the Bishop of Bath and Wells came to Bristol to consecrate the New Church at Bedminster. Although there is no evidence to

1. *Bristol Mirror*, 15 Oct 1831. *Felix Farley* estimated that some three to four thousand were present.
2. *Bristol Gazette*, 13 Oct 1831 .
3. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 22 October 1831.

support Eagles' contention that "most of the leading men of the Union" were present, the incident had been deliberately encouraged from some quarter, for notices had been put around the city exhorting the populace to:

> "Receive him with every demonstration that becomes his exalted rank, and LATE VOTE IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS. Refrain therefore from HOOTING, PELTING, GROANING, HISSING or any other annoyance that may be offensive to a man who has so recently declared himself against the VOICE OF THE PEOPLE."[1]

The Union was also given the opportunity to gain new political advantages. On 20 October Herapath heard through Joseph Reynolds of the Reform Committee that the Magistracy wished to come to some constructive arrangement with the Union before Wetherell's controversial visit took place. Sensing that he was in a position to dictate terms, Herapath insisted that the magistrates should contact him directly, and he was accordingly visited on the following morning by Thomas Daniel, the most senior and influential of the aldermen. At this meeting, Herapath assured Daniel that, so long as troops were not brought in, the Union would adopt a position of neutrality, but he refused to countenance the use of Union members as special constables. On the 25th, however, this uneasy truce was broken when the Union was informed by Protheroe that a secret deputation had been sent by the magistrates to ask the Secretary of State for troops, and that neither he nor Baillie, the elected representatives, had been consulted. Ham later wrote: "I am quite convinced that the Union *could* and *would* have preserved the peace of the city but for this occurrence".[2]

By making overtures to an unofficial and scarcely respectable organisation, the magistrates betrayed an alarming lack of confidence in their own ability to keep the peace, while the bargain which was eventually concluded only left them in an even more compromised position. It is surprising that Alderman Daniel consented to the terms of the agreement, for the vague

1. Poster bound in the scrapbook *Troubles in Bristol by Politicks, Fire and Pestilence.* The printer's name had been torn off, but an attempt was made to prosecute a radical printer, I. N. Pearce, for producing it.
2. Bristol Reference Library: Ham to Place, 10 Aug 1835. Copies of Reynolds' letter and Herapath's reply are also contained in this correspondence.

promise of neutrality was hardly likely to inhibit the activities of the Union, while it left the Corporation still without an ally to help control the hostile crowds which were expected to greet Wetherell. Moreover, Daniel must have realised that, despite his promise, the Corporation would have to apply for military aid if it failed to elicit a positive offer of support from any other quarter. As it was, the Union leaders were able to make political capital by exposing the way in which the magistrates had deceived them: in an outburst of self-righteous indignation, Herapath wrote to Daniel that, "The intention of the City Authorities to employ an armed force . . . has produced effects upon the Council of the Union which the Magistrates alone must be answerable for".[1] And the Union announced to the public that—

> "If the magistracy of the city feel themselves incompetent to preserve the public peace without being supported by the military, they should resign their offices, and suffer the civic authorities to be elected by a majority of the votes of their fellow-citizens. The Council think that a man clothed in robes of magistracy ought never to be a politician, as such a magistrate cannot be expected to possess the public confidence, without which he will always be found incompetent to preserve the public peace. They would, therefore, recommend to the Corporation the immediate resignation of Sir Charles Wetherell, such being the means best calculated to prevent riot and perhaps bloodshed."[2]

There is no doubt that this rhetoric was highly inflammatory. It implied that any civil disturbance would have the tacit support of the Union, and that it would be interpreted as the natural result of friction between the populace and a totally unrepresentative city government. This impression was reinforced by Protheroe's insistence that "the people of Bristol" should be allowed "to express in some measure their strong and unalterable disapprobation of Sir Charles Wetherell's political conduct, that we might all be insured against the insidious conduct of the Tories who, if the people are quiet,

1. Herapath to Daniel, 26 Oct 1831, pub. in W. H. Somerton's *A Narrative of the Bristol Riots* p. 8.
2. Uncatalogued notice, dated 25 Oct 1831, bound in *Troubles in Bristol by Politicks, Fire and Pestilence.*

would say there is a re-action against the Bill". Two days later, on the 27th, the magistrates responded to the challenge with a public notice in which they expressed the hope that "all classes of their fellow-citizens, however they may differ on political subjects, will . . . abstain from manifesting any declaration of their opinions on so solemn and important an occasion". But it was too late to restore public confidence in the Corporation, and as the Recorder's visit grew imminent, people became increasingly uncertain as to whom they should look to for protection and leadership. In the confusion, the Union appeared to be more powerful than it really was: *Felix Farley* complained that "we know not . . . whether it is a recognised body by the Ministers and by our Magistrates. But this we see, that it is corresponded with, and acts equally dictatorially and Magisterially as our legally constituted authorities".[1]

Tories claimed that propaganda issued by Political Unionists and other Radicals was directly responsible for influencing the lower classes to rebel against the city authorities; they warned that "the workman is flattered and cajoled into the conceit that his chief and proper business is to meddle in politics . . ." And although both the Reform Committee and the Political Union insisted that their supporters were drawn only from the 'respectable' classes, Radical political ideas did undoubtedly filter through to the labouring population. For Bristol was a city of small businesses and workshops, where the close personal contact between employers and employees ensured that political issues were freely discussed and that the labouring classes identified with the grievances of their masters. Moreover, as a contemporary survey indicates that 77 per cent of male heads of families in Bristol's poorer districts were literate, many working men must have read the anti-Corporation and pro-Reform notices which were displayed around the city: Tories complained that there were "at least eight depositories for infidel and treasonable tracts in different quarters of the town", and that the handbills were "printed in the usual way or on pocket handkerchiefs for greater durability".[2]

1. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 5 Nov 1831.
2. Nehemiah (pseud.), *A Plain Account of the Riots at Bristol*, Bristol, 1831, pp. 4 & 5.

Political slogans were certainly used during the riots, especially "The King and Reform!" The rioters, who believed fervently that 'Reform' would be the salvation of the working man, burned and destroyed in its name: a Mr. Gregory, watching the removal of some plundered furniture, "asked the man if it was a Reform table—the man said Yes and Gregory let him pass".[1] Recent events in the city had led them to believe that it was their unpopular local government which most urgently needed to be 'Reformed', and it is therefore not surprising that virtually all the buildings which were destroyed belonged to the Corporation, and that rioters were heard to shout "Oh! It's only Corporation property!" as they ravaged Queen Square. The established Church likewise qualified for popular abuse: rioters chanted "Down with the churches and mend the roads with them" and "—and—the Bishop and the Corporation!" And the suggestion that the rioters should "go and destroy the Dock gates as, since their erection, their wages had been lowered", echoed an ancient grievance against the Corporation's notorious Dock Company.[2]

But although these slogans reveal that the rioters were familiar with the prominent political themes of the day, their actions were no more than an immediate response to the political instability which prevailed in the city. For the Reformers' onslaught against the Corporation had made it a vulnerable target for an excited crowd. The rioters appear to have had no conscious political motivation, and it is significant that, both at the trials and in their last confessions, not one of them attempted to justify his actions. If a defendant failed to establish his innocence, he merely pleaded drunkenness to excuse his behaviour. In this sense, the riot closely resembled the spontaneous uprisings of the eighteenth century, and had very little in common with the self-consciously Radical disturbances of the new industrial age.

The conventional Tory interpretation of the riot as part of a nation-wide conspiracy to overthrow the ruling classes cannot therefore be substantiated. There is no evidence that the violence was premeditated. Rioters armed themselves only with sticks, iron railings or other objects which came readily

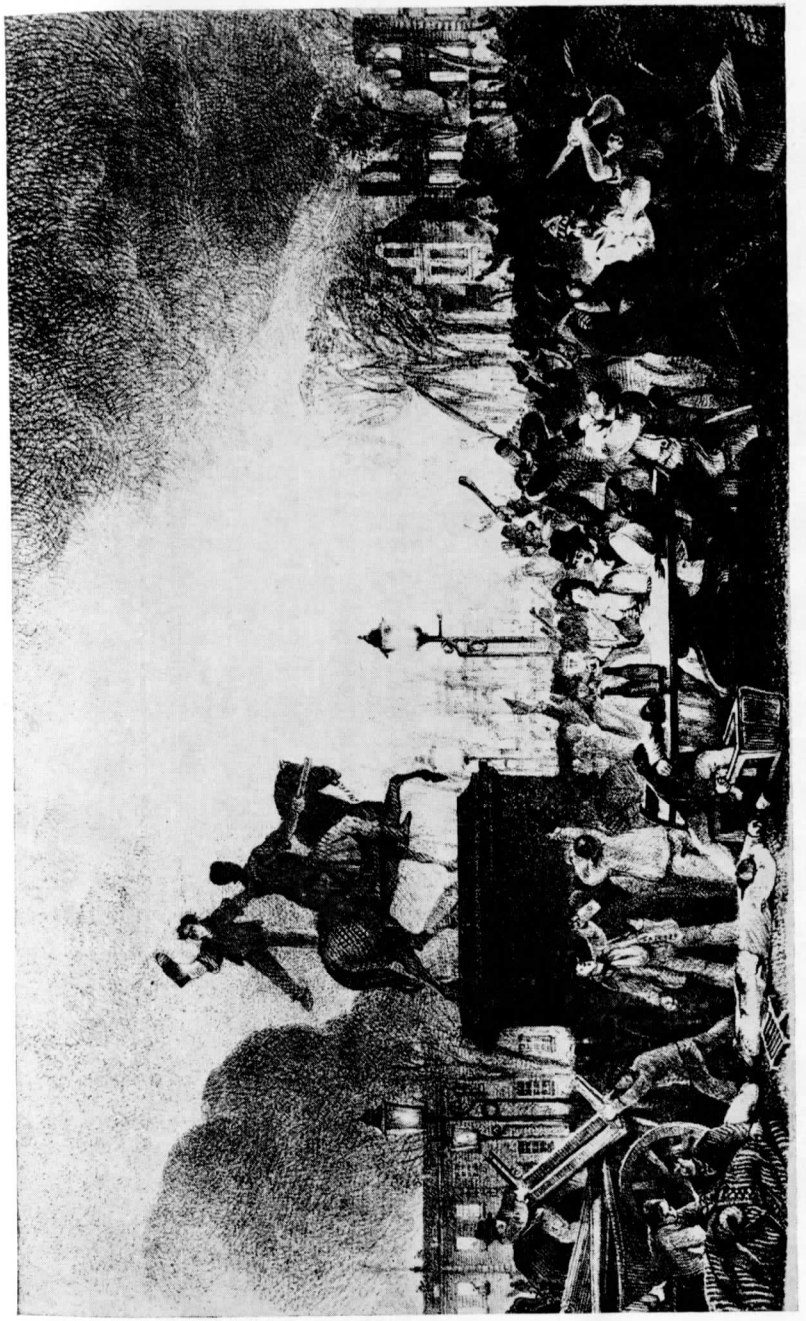
1. W. H. Somerton, *A Full Report of the Trials of the Rioters*, Bristol, 1832, p. 30.
2. W. H. Somerton, *Narrative of the Bristol Riots*, p. 22.

to hand, or which could be obtained by breaking into forges and smiths in the city. Weapons had not been stockpiled, and the magistrates' wise decision to remove the contents of the gunsmiths to a safer place, ensured that firearms were not used. John Eagles' comment that "a druggist was engaged during the whole week previous to the riot, in making balls the size of walnuts . . . all ready by the Friday evening", is clearly an exaggeration, although some fire-balls of "tow and pitch" were manufactured during the riot.

There is no evidence either that the riot was planned or led by professional agitators, despite colourful contemporary descriptions of "tall men in long cloaks and fur hats who appeared to give direction to the mob".[1] The parallel with the 1830 Revolution in France was widely made at the time and French aid was suspected, but this was never proved and seems highly improbable. Similarly, there were no grounds for the suggestion that "to show a formidable front, a great number of delegates from the Birmingham and other Political Unions were dispatched to Bristol"; certainly none of the members of the Bristol Union was involved in the rioting.[2]

Throughout the trials of the rioters, the prosecution attempted to uncover ringleaders but with no real success. Christopher Davis, "a retired tradesman of good circumstances", was sentenced to be hanged because "the effect of such a man going among a mob must be most mischievous . . . it tends to hold out encouragement to the most depraved portion of society". His only crime was to have shouted a few drunken words of approval at the rioters. Even less convincing was the case made out against William Clarke, a poor sawyer whose excitable and unstable temperament was the result of an accident at work some years before. He was accused of being "the active ringleader among them all . . ."[3] Eye-witnesses denied that anyone organised the rioters or led them to the scenes of destruction: the Toll-collector at Princes-street Bridge said of the crowd which converged on the New Gaol on the Sunday afternoon, "there were hundreds, some had hammers, and some had bars or iron . . . there was no-one leading . . ."[4] Decisions about

1. (MS Letter in Bristol Archives Office, Ref. No. 16178): Mrs. J. C. Cross to Rev. C. H. Davies, 18 Dec 1877.
2. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 5 Nov 1831, p. 2.
3. W. H. Somerton, *Trials of the Rioters*, pp. 21 & 9.
4. P. Rose, *Trials of the Persons concerned in the late Riots*, Bristol 1832, p. 8.



Queen Square on the night of Sunday 30 Oct. 1831: "By the equestrian Statue of William III, surmounted with a cap of liberty, were costly tables spread, and the revel of a plundered feat, with yell and imprecation and wine and blood, was held to celebrate this first Sabbath of Reform — of Revolution."

By courtesy of Bristol Reference Library.

BRISTOL
General Union

The Council of the Union know that
Sir Chas. Wetherell
Has *left the City*, and that the ASSIZES are *Postponed*. They earnestly entreat that every Man will *immediately* return to his own home.

Outrages only injure the Cause of REFORM.

By Order of the Council.

W. HERAPATH,
Vice-President.

Sunday Morning, 30th October, 1831.

MILLS AND SON, PRINTERS, NICHOLAS STREET, BRISTOL.

Notice issued by the Union after the mob had forced Wetherell to make a roof-top escape from the Mansion House.
By courtesy of Bristol Reference Library.

strategy appear to have been arrived at collectively, almost intuitively, for the buildings which were attacked were all symbols of old and familiar grievances.

Anxious to clear themselves of the Tory accusation that they had mobilised the lower classes under the banner of 'Reform', the Liberals insisted that the rioters were drawn from sub-political social groups. Hence the *Bristol Gazette* stated quite categorically that the rioters "wholly consisted of boys and striplings, persons evidently without stated employment, which the densely populated purlieus of wretchedness in St Philips and the neighbourhood of Lawfords Gate had sent forth on the occasion . . . not a few among them were women of abandoned character", and Ham described them as "a set of reprobates which the superiority of the police of London and other places had driven into Bristol as a place of refuge".

This interpretation was equally fanciful, for the rioters seem to have been mostly men in their twenties and thirties rather than women or young boys, and they were certainly not part of the criminal underworld; only one of those arrested had any previous conviction. Of those who were found guilty for their part in the riot, at least thirty-one were in regular employment and only one was mentioned as being out of work.[1] Six of them owned property of some sort, while the remainder were unskilled or semi-skilled workmen such as porters, labourers, carpenters and journeymen-bakers. As one eye-witness observed, "the respectable part of the artisans were engaged in this riot, by respectable I mean men earning their livelihood . . ."[2] Most of those who were brought to trial lived with their families in cheap lodging-houses in the overpopulated parishes of Temple and St. James in the centre of Bristol, where they were well-known members of the local community. This explodes the popular myth that a large proportion of the rioters were people who had come into the city from the surrounding countryside, and that ". . . persons were sent to the neighbouring towns, urging an attendance in Bristol on October 29, in consequence of which the city was full of strangers".[3] The

1. The trials provide no information about the social circumstances of the other people convicted.
2. *Trial of Charles Pinney*, p. 126.
3. John Eagles, *The Bristol Riots*, Bristol 1832, p. 165.

common belief that the rioters included men from the Kingswood collieries, which had provided trouble-makers on countless former occasions, was also unfounded; the pit-owners themselves confirmed that their men had remained at work during this time.

The active rioters, then, were drawn neither from the semi-criminal elements of the city nor from the mechanics and artisans of the Political Union, but from Bristol's poorer working classes. They were the men who could be found out in the streets on any occasion of great public excitement; indeed, they had probably been amongst the very crowd which had given Sir Charles Wetherell a hero's welcome only two years before when he had come to the city as the arch-opponent of Roman Catholic emancipation.

The immediate effect of the riot was that the Corporation was utterly discredited. The Liberals in Bristol believed that the riot had proved, beyond all possible doubt, that the magistrates were not fit to run the city, and they therefore set up a Committee of Enquiry to ensure that all the facts were brought to light. They wanted the magistrates officially and publicly disgraced and removed from office. Lord Melbourne hesitated, claiming that he was not legally empowered to take action against the city authorities, but the volume of evidence produced by the Committee eventually persuaded him to bring the magistrates to trial.

For four months, while Pinney and his colleagues awaited the results of these negotiations between the Secretary of State and the self-styled representatives of Bristol, the government of the city was virtually suspended. General Jackson's letters to the War Office betrayed a mounting anger at the way in which the departure of the troops was being delayed by the failure of the Corporation to institute an effective police force. But the majority of the citizens had no intention of assisting the Corporation to re-establish its authority by co-operating over the recruitment of constables, and as it became increasingly obvious that the Magistracy did not "possess power or influence . . . to call forth and array the strength of the city", the onus of maintaining order inevitably fell on General

Jackson. In January 1832, the rioters were due to be tried and Jackson, anticipating further outbreaks of violence, reluctantly agreed to use his troops, to keep the peace, but he recognised that "the appearance of a well-arranged civil force during the approaching Trials, would, more than the presence of any other force, inspire confidence in the restoration of order."[1]

The trials of the rioters were conducted peacefully but although five men were sentenced to death and seventy-six were transported or gaoled, the crucial questions raised by the riot still remained unanswered. The riot had, in fact, settled nothing; it merely heralded a period of open confrontation between the Corporation and the citizens. For no sooner had the Committee of Enquiry successfully completed its assignment than another popular pressure-group, the Central Committee of Parochial Deputies, was formed to thrash out the details of new legislation to compensate victims of the Riot and to institute a police force. Initially an all-party organisation, it rapidly became dominated by the men who had been leading influences in the Political Union and the Reform Committee, and who saw that these issues could provide them with yet another platform from which to attack the Corporation.

The final draft of the Compensation Bill represented a great victory for the Central Committee. The Magistracy was forced to tacitly admit responsibility for the riot by abandoning most of its own claims for compensation, and by contributing £500 towards the losses sustained by individual victims. It was also obliged to hand over the task of assessing and awarding compensation to a Board of Commissioners elected by the ratepayers themselves. But the magistrates refused to accept the Central Committee's conditions for the establishment of a new police force. When it became clear that the magistrates envisaged a force which would be controlled entirely by themselves but financed out of a County Rate levied on the citizens, the Deputies retorted angrily that "harmony betwixt the Municipal Authorities and the Inhabitants can never be restored unless the magistrates waive the right of taxing the city until it be first shown that the existing sources of income are inadequate".[2] The two sides continued to argue throughout the spring and summer of 1832 but deadlock was finally reached when

1. H.O. 40/28. Jackson to Lord Fitzroy Somerset, 27 Nov & 25 Dec 1831.
2. *Troubles in Bristol by Politicks Fire and Pestilence*, p. 265.

the Central Committee was refused access to the accounts of Corporate expenditure. The Police Bill was shelved and, apart from the acquisition of twelve day constables, Bristol remained virtually unpoliced until after 1835.

The magistrates were brought to trial in August 1832, but by this time Brereton's suicide had already incriminated the military and made further investigations somewhat distasteful. Pinney, of all the magistrates probably the least culpable, was tried first and his acquittal ensured that the charges against his colleagues were dropped. The Liberals in the city were thus forced to wait until the Municipal Reform Bill became law for an opportunity to dislodge the Tory oligarchy and replace it by democratically elected representatives. They waited in vain, however, for in 1835 the magistrates skilfully manipulated the new legislation entirely to their own advantage: the boundaries of the new electoral wards were redrawn so that, despite a popular majority for the Liberals, the Tory clique was returned to power, more secure than ever before.

Amongst the few Radicals who obtained a seat on the "reformed" Council was William Herapath, but the Tories successfully excluded him from all important committee work, and his pretensions to public office also cost him his popular support in the city. A writer, signing himself 'Caustic', bitterly castigated him for having abandoned the Union, and claimed "You might have been the first political character in the city—but haughtiness, pride and vanity have destroyed your usefulness, and now you are the lowest. You rose like a rocket but have fallen like the stick."[1]

There can be no doubt that it was the fate of the city Corporation, and not that of the Reform Bill, which was really at issue in Bristol in 1831. In the atmosphere of urgency and excitement created by the Lords' rejection of the Reform Bill, Wetherell's arrival in the city was bound to bring people out onto the streets, but it was not any great passion for Parliamentary Reform which inspired respectable citizens to allow this demonstration to escalate into a dangerous riot. Lord Melbourne himself was aware of the true cause of their anger;

1. Uncatalogued press cutting (? Feb 1833), bound in the scrapbook, *Bristol Riots*, Bristol Reference Library, B7426.

addressing Parliament on the subject of the Bristol Riots, he said

> ". . . I have felt much less fear from Birmingham or Manchester, than I have from any town where there was a Corporation . . . Great excitement has prevailed in Birmingham and Manchester, but there was no local odium, no local hatred, no local irritation, which are all far more violent than the hatred and irritation arising from public and political causes."[1]

1. *Morning Chronicle*, 8 Aug 1835.

NOTE ON THE SOURCES

The Bristol Reference Library has various collections of contemporary pamphlets on the riots. They include H. W. Somerton, *A narrative of the Bristol riots;* P. Rose, *Particulars of the late dreadful riots in Bristol;* Major Mackworth, *A personal narrative of the late events in Bristol;* T. J. Manchee, *The origin of the riots in Bristol;* Anon., *A few facts relating to the present local government of Bristol and hints for its probable improvement;* Anon., *A hint from Bristol, or what should honest men do now?*; Anon., *Remarks suggested by recent events on the necessity of an efficient police in this city;* and Nehemiah (pseud.), *A plain account of the riots at Bristol.* J. Eagles, *The Bristol riots, their causes, progress and consequences,* 1832, is by far the most detailed contemporary analysis of the disturbance, but it is largely inaccurate and extremely partisan. The Reference Library also possesses the Calendar of all rioters brought to trial, copies of the petitions on behalf of those convicted, and accounts of the last confessions of William Clarke, Joseph Keys and Christopher Davis. There are full transcripts of the trials of the rioters and the Mayor, and of the courts martial of Lieut. Col. Brereton and Capt. Warrington. Much valuable material is also contained in the scrapbooks *Troubles in Bristol by politics, fire and pestilence, Bristol riots* (3 vols.), *Posters chiefly relating to the* 1831 *election,* and *Broadsides concerning the new County Rate.*

Reform Committee and Political Union meetings were reported in the weekly press. Complete runs of *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, *Bristol Mercury*, *Bristol Gazette*, and *Bristol Mirror* are in the Reference Library, while the other main local paper for 1831-2, the *Bristol Liberal*, is held in the British Museum Newspaper Library at Colindale. Bristol Reference Library also possesses a set of James Acland's 'unstamped' and violently anti-Corporation publication, the *Bristolian*, which ran from Jan. 1827 to May 1831, as well as the Tory 'unstamped' *Job Nott* from Dec. 1831 to Dec. 1833.

Correspondence between various members of Charles Pinney's family about his part in the riots, and other material relating to the disturbance, are contained in the Pinney Papers, R-5 and S-2, in the Bristol University Library. The Bristol City Archives Department has some interesting MS letters written by Mrs. J. C. Cross respecting a collection of original material on the riots compiled by her husband, formerly the legal adviser to the Committee of Enquiry. This collection is now bound in 3 vols. in the British Museum. Also in the British Museum is Francis Place's account of the riot, Add. MS 27790, based on information he received from the Bristol Political Union. Correspondence between the Home Secretary and the Committee of Enquiry, together with copies of the depositions of witnesses, are in the Public Records Office, TS 11/1250. The Home Office papers, HO 40/28 and HO 41/10, contain a copy of the Rules and Orders of the Bristol General Union, as well as the Home Secretary's correspondence both with the military command in Bristol and with the Mayor. Details of the courts martial can be found in the War Office papers, WO 71/280.