

'THE FREEDOM OF ELECTION'
THE COMPANY OF CUTLERS IN HALLAMSHIRE
AND
THE GROWTH OF RADICALISM IN SHEFFIELD
1784-1792

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CHAPTER FIVE

Sheffield in 1790

Introduction

For much of the eighteenth century, Sheffield was a relatively harmonious place. Trade, generally, was booming and work was plentiful. There had been no significant riots since 1756, there was very little serious crime and its inhabitants were, in the main, tolerant of one another despite their religious differences.³⁶⁵ But, after six years of acrimony within the town's principal trade, the situation had changed dramatically. Divisions had begun to appear at all levels of society, divisions that, in some cases, would continue well into the twentieth century. And with these divisions had come mistrust, anger and fear. Even Joseph Gales had suffered: on May 16th 1789, for example, he noted that 'the journeymen were highly enraged' with him for publishing the letter from 'A Votary of Freedom' (see previous chapter), so much so that some workshops had cancelled their order for the *Register*. He reassured himself, and his readers, that his publication of the reply from 'A Friend to Freedom' would not only see the order reinstated but also that the journeymen would have his paper 'framed and glazed'.³⁶⁶

³⁶⁵ The riots in 1756 had been caused by food shortages and widespread anger about 'stuffing', the local name for payment in kind (see chapter one). The cutlery trades had been badly affected by the outbreak of the Seven Years War and the subsequent loss access to the European markets.

³⁶⁶ *Sheffield Register*, May 16th 1789.

During the second half of 1789 and 1790, the situation was further aggravated by events outside of Sheffield and this chapter will examine the impact of these events. It will also demonstrate how the increasingly tense, and potentially volatile, atmosphere can be seen in local reaction to two events that occurred within the town itself: one seemingly innocuous - the theft of John Wharton's meat - and the other, the scissorgrinders' strike, that was to leave a long-term legacy of bitterness and suspicion.

National and International Events

The outbreak of the French Revolution was, undoubtedly, the most significant event to take place during the period in question and, as has previously been noted, one of its most ardent supporters was Joseph Gales. From July 11th 1789, when he published an article in the *Register* headlined 'Revolution in France' in which he outlined how the crisis had come about, until he was forced to flee from Sheffield in June 1794, he reported the activities of the National Assembly and then the new French government and the successes of the French army in a positive and enthusiastic manner. Initially, his enthusiasm was shared by the majority of the people of Sheffield (as it was by the majority of the country at large), many of whom believed that the French were, belatedly, starting on the path to constitutional reform that the English had embarked upon a hundred years earlier. There was also a certain sense of satisfaction that an old enemy and, more importantly, a significant economic and commercial competitor, was

being made to suffer. Although this support did begin to wane, particularly amongst the town's ruling classes, in late 1792 and early 1793 in the wake of the September Massacres, the execution of Louis XVI, the outbreak of war between England and France and, in the opinion of some, the threat of revolution at home, it nevertheless remained strong amongst a significant proportion of Sheffield's population – as witnessed by the thousands who attended the celebrations to mark the successes of the French armies in October and November 1792.³⁶⁷

The French Revolution began at a time when debate about rights and freedoms was, once again, prominent in England. Just a few months earlier, in November 1788, celebrations had been held across the country to mark the centenary of the Glorious Revolution when, in the words of Joseph Gales, William of Orange 'had engaged in the glorious enterprize to save the laws and liberties of the nation from the destruction with which they were threatened'.³⁶⁸ In Sheffield, a thanksgiving service had been held in the Parish Church during which the Revd. Wilkinson had preached a sermon on 1 Samuel 12, v. 24 - 'Only fear the Lord and serve him in truth with all your heart: for consider how great things he has done for you'. This had been followed by a dinner in the Tontine Inn that was attended by 125 gentlemen, whose toasts had included 'The Glorious Revolution', 'The King and Constitution', 'The Memory of

³⁶⁷ *Sheffield Register*, October 19th and November 30th 1792; Stevenson, *Artisans*, p. 19 and pp. 59-60.

³⁶⁸ *Sheffield Register*, October 8th 1788.

Patriots' and 'May the freedom of election be preserved, trial by jury maintained; and the liberty of the press be secured to the latest posterity'. On the following evening, November 5th, a ball had been held in the Assembly Rooms. The celebrations, however, had not been confined to Sheffield's social elite. Bonfires had been lit in various parts of the town, 'several sheep were roasted whole; and innumerable squibs, crackers, etc., etc., kept up an almost incessant noise', although Joseph Gales had proudly proclaimed that 'nowhere else of like magnitude and popularity was it [the Revolution] celebrated with greater decorum'.³⁶⁹

Whilst these centenary celebrations had highlighted the achievements of the Glorious Revolution, they had also re-kindled debate about how the liberties of freeborn Englishmen were still being threatened by factionalism and corruption in government. In turn, this debate had re-kindled debate about parliamentary and electoral reform.³⁷⁰ These debates were inevitably informed by events across the Channel, especially after August 26th 1789 when the French National Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. A few months later, the National Assembly declared that no citizen would be debarred from holding office, whether civil or military, on the grounds of religion. This was something that the Americans had recently enshrined in their constitution and for which Dissenters in England had been campaigning for a number of

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, November 8th 1788.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, October 4th 1788; Black, *The Association*, pp. 204-9.

years. Inspired by the actions of the French and by the fact that in May 1789 a motion for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts had been defeated in Parliament by just twenty votes (122:102), the Dissenters believed that there was, at last, a realistic possibility of religious toleration being accepted in England. They began an aggressive campaign to gain support for what they hoped would be their final campaign to secure the repeal of the hated Acts. Regional boards of Dissenting Deputies carried resolutions in favour of repeal, petitions were sent to the House of Commons and electoral pledges were extracted from parliamentary candidates. But when some of the campaigners began to call for a root and branch reform of the Established Church, the abolition of tithes, and even the disestablishment of the Church, many in both the Church and the Government became alarmed. As Dissenters became more and more vociferous in their support for the reformers in France, their opponents began to portray them as a threat to the political and religious *status quo* in England and even as potential revolutionaries.

The motion for the repeal of the Acts was brought before the House of Commons in early March 1790. In a heated debate, Charles James Fox spoke in favour of the motion reminding the House of the Dissenters' support in 1688 and their loyalty in 1715 and 1745, whilst the Prime Minister, William Pitt, spoke against it arguing that the state was entitled to withhold office from anyone that it believed to be a threat to the constitution. Henry Beaufoy countered that if the Acts were to be maintained as part of a defensive policy,

then the same fears could be used to justify disenfranchising Dissenters and even banishing them from the country. The most passionate speech of the debate, however, was delivered by Edmund Burke. Burke, who had previously been a supporter of religious toleration, was one of the very few Englishman who had opposed the French Revolution from the outset, believing that it was the result not of a widespread desire for reform but of the machinations of a small group of manipulative people who wanted power for themselves. His main argument against the motion for repeal, however, was the hostility that he believed Dissenters had towards the Established Church and he suggested that ‘possibly the dissenting preachers were themselves recommending the same sort of robbery and plunder of the Church as had happened in France’.³⁷¹ When the vote was taken, the motion was resoundingly defeated by almost three to one (294:105).

In many parts of the country, Church and King parties were formed in the wake of this defeat ‘to celebrate the delivery of the church in its hour of need’ and ‘to ensure that the fruits of its victory over the Dissenters were not thrown away’.³⁷² Whilst there had been considerable support for the Dissenters’ campaign in Sheffield, there is no evidence that such a party was formed in the town. However, the accusations of radicalism that had been made against Dissenters would inevitably have caused suspicion to grow in the minds of

³⁷¹ Goodwin, *Friends*, pp. 96-7. Both Burke’s mother and wife were Catholics.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 98.

some members of the Established Church (men like Revd. James Wilkinson, for example), especially in an atmosphere that was coloured by what were perceived to be the increasingly radical activities of the Freemen. It should also be remembered that on March 1st 1790, Enoch Trickett had described the Cutlers' Company as a 'despotic and arbitrary power' and that just three days after the defeat of the Dissenters' motion for repeal, the Freemen's petition for an act to give them the right to elect the officers of the Company had been referred to a committee of the House of Commons.

The Dissenters' defeat coincided with the decision of the M.P. Henry Flood to withdraw his motion for parliamentary reform before it was put to the vote. Flood's proposals had been relatively moderate - the abolition of fifty rotten boroughs, the creation of a similar number of new constituencies, and the extension of the franchise to all resident householders – but he was unable to garner sufficient support amongst his fellow M.P.s. Whilst some were beginning to agree with Edmund Burke that any change was unwise when the French Revolution 'was threatening all social order', the majority were just not interested in any reform that threatened their own positions.³⁷³

As has been previously noted, there was a considerable amount of support for both the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and parliamentary reform in

³⁷³ Jennifer Mori, *Britain in the Age of the French Revolution 1785-1820* (Harlow, 2000), p. 65; H. T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth Century Britain* (London, 1977), p. 237.

Sheffield. Joseph Gales was an ardent champion of both causes and he regularly used the pages of the *Register* to publish articles, letters and editorial comments supporting the campaigns. There was a notable increase in the number of these articles from the beginning of 1790, partly, of course, in response to the Dissenters' campaign but also in response to events in France (which Gales wholeheartedly supported) and to increased activity by organisations like the Revolution Societies and, more importantly, the Society for Constitutional Information.³⁷⁴ Gales' enthusiasm for reform could also have been reinvigorated by his acquaintance with Thomas Paine, whose forthright views on politics, economics and social policy were shortly to be made public in the book *Rights of Man*.³⁷⁵ Unfortunately, whilst it is known that the two men were acquainted, it is not known where or when they met except that it was probably on one of Paine's regular trips to the south Yorkshire area to visit the Walkers of Rotherham who were building a bridge that he had designed.³⁷⁶ And whilst there is no evidence to prove, or disprove, the theory, it would be reasonable to

³⁷⁴ Throughout January and February 1790, for example, Gales published a series of articles entitled *Observations on the Test Laws* and also numerous letters both on the subject generally and commenting on the various meetings of the Dissenting Deputies. He was also very supportive of the campaign for the abolition of slavery.

³⁷⁵ The first part of Paine's *Rights of Man* was published in February 1791.

³⁷⁶ Paine made a number of visits to the area between October 1788 and June 1790. It was originally intended that the bridge that he had designed and that the Walkers were building should be the new Blackfriar's Bridge, but this did not happen. Instead it was erected near Paddington in June 1790 where it was exhibited for one year and members of the public were charged 1s to see it, walk on it and even jump off it. It was, however, the proto-type for a bridge built over the River Wear in Sunderland in 1796. V. M. Thornes, 'Tom Paine in South Yorkshire', *Holberry Society Bulletin* 3 (1979). pp. 3-4.

assume that Paine also met some of Gales' friends – men like Enoch Trickett and the other leaders of the Freeman's campaign, for example.

Throughout the early months of 1790, whilst the Cutlers' Company and the Freeman were arguing over amendments to the Act of Incorporation, Gales ensured that both the debate about the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and the debate about parliamentary reform remained at the forefront of his readers' minds. He regularly published the resolutions of the regional meetings of Dissenting Ministers and Lay Deputies and, on January 8th 1790, he, somewhat provocatively, published the resolutions of the local meeting that had recently been held in Wakefield on his front page alongside an article announcing that the National Assembly in Paris had declared that no citizen should be barred from employment on the grounds of religion.³⁷⁷ He also published a series of articles entitled *Observations on the Test Laws* and numerous letters both on the subject generally and commenting on the meetings of the Deputies.³⁷⁸

In the week before the election of June 1790, he reminded his readers (and local voters) of the Dissenters' defeat and of the calumnies that had been spread about them by publishing a letter from Edward Jeffries, the chairman of the

³⁷⁷ *Sheffield Register*, January 8th 1790.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, all editions, January and February 1790.

Committee appointed to oversee the campaign, in which Jeffries explained that the Dissenters had only wanted the restitution of their natural rights:

The late application to Parliament for the REPEAL of the CORPORATION and TEST ACTS appeared so clearly founded on the unalterable Principles of Reason and Justice that we cannot but regard the Manner in which it was defeated, and the violent Spirit that has been raised against us, not only as an Injury to ourselves, but as a Discredit to the Character of a free and enlightened Nation. All that we claimed from our Country, was to be delivered from certain ignominious Disqualifications imposed by Laws which deprived us of our rights as Men and Citizens ... Was it to be expected that we should continue for ever silent under Grievances thus disgraceful and galling to every liberal Mind? If we had not fought for the redress of them, we should have been wanting to the Feelings and Dignity of Freemen ... From the Manner, however, in which our Application to Parliament has been opposed, and from the Writings which with so much Violence have appeared, it seems as if we were regarded as disloyal Subjects. But we spurn with Indignation at this Charge ...³⁷⁹

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, June 18th 1790.

And on the day of the election itself, Gales vented his frustration and contempt for politicians in an angry editorial in which he lambasted them for only visiting their constituents when an election was imminent and for making promises on the hustings that they had no intentions of keeping. He also criticised the system which encouraged voters to support the candidate who provided the most lavish entertainment rather than one who would best serve his constituency:

A promise (says a homely adage) is a sort of *pye-crust* - made to be broken. No small quantity of this *crust* has, for a few days past, been formed – not in *standing* pyes – by the skill of the canvassing confectioners, and crammed down the throats of all who had *stomachs* to digest it. It is curious, when a representative pays a septennial visit to his friends, how profuse he is in that particular – *promising* sometimes more in *seven minutes*, than he can possibly *perform in seven years*; nor is it less curious, how the *qualifications* of candidates are measured by their hospitality at these Carnivals. An *empty head* in a *candidate* is of little consequence, so he leaves no *empty bellies* among his burgesses! How finely does that man speak! – how *deeply* interested is he in the *growing prosperity* of his constituents! – how friendly to the *constitution*! – if he *fill* the *hungry* with *good things*, and send not the *poor empty* away! – On the contrary, should he be *weak* in these *virtues*, and unfortunately not have *strength* enough to *create* a custom-

officer, *make* an excise-man, or even a *window-peeper* – he is an enemy to *Magna Charta*, and it would be *dangerous* to entrust him with a *seat* in the *House*. So much for the *freedom* of *British* representation!³⁸⁰

The following week, he published a list of sixty ‘rotten’ boroughs headed by Newton, on the Isle of Wight, and Old Sarum which each sent two Members to Parliament but which each had an electorate of only one.³⁸¹ Despite the fact that very few of his readers were entitled to vote (and the fact that, because of the long journey involved, few of those who were entitled actually did vote), Joseph Gales knew, or at least he believed, that people who read the *Sheffield Register* were both interested in and shared his anger about the iniquities of the electoral system.

The Freemen

Meanwhile, there was considerable frustration amongst the Freemen, the Members of the Cutlers’ Company and, no doubt, many others in the town that the seemingly interminable dispute within the cutlery trades continued to drag on. The arbitrators who had been appointed with much anticipation in early May 1790 had been unable to negotiate a compromise that satisfied both sides

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, June 25th 1790.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, July 2nd 1790.

and the situation, once again, appeared to be deadlocked. There is also evidence to suggest that some Freemen were not at all happy about the direction in which their campaign was going. They wanted a return to the situation that *they believed* had existed when their forefathers had been working in the cutlery trades, when the opportunity to become an economically independent master had been available to all, and they believed that this could only happen if the Company enforced its existing rules and regulations. But, despite their success at the Court of King's Bench, this was still not happening. Their leaders were no longer 'ordinary' cutlers - journeymen and journeymen-Freemen – but men who, in many respects, were very similar to the Members of the Cutlers' Company: men who were employers, successful master manufacturers who wanted the trades to be regulated to suit their needs. They wanted a voice in how the Company was managed and the emphasis of the Freemen's campaign had shifted accordingly. There were some Freemen who were yet to be convinced that this was the way to resolve their grievances. Some felt bitter and betrayed and, in the same week that the arbitrators had been appointed, one of their number had written to the *Sheffield Register* accusing Enoch Trickett and the other members of the Freemen's Committee 'of having bartered away the rights of the Freemen, to serve their own interested purposes'.³⁸²

³⁸² *Ibid.*, May 7th 1790.

The French Revolution, the campaign to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts, and the resurgence of interest in parliamentary reform had raised fears in many quarters about the spread of radicalism and the possible threat that this posed to the existing social order. In Sheffield, the events of the previous six years and the increasing radicalism of the Freemen and their supporters had persuaded many, particularly those in authority, that social order in their town was already under threat. They were, consequently, sensitive to any incidents that they believed might further undermine that order and this is demonstrated by their reactions to the events described below.

The theft of John Wharton's meat

On the night of Saturday August 29th 1789, five men were drinking together in the White Hart on Waingate.³⁸³ Four - John Stevens, John Booth, Thomas Lastley and Michael Bingham - were button makers and one, John Wharton, was a labourer. When Wharton left the tavern, the others decided to follow in order to try to persuade him to rejoin them. They caught up with him on Lady's Bridge and, in an apparently inebriated bout of horseplay, snatched his basket, which contained some groceries and a shoulder of mutton, and ran off with it, expecting Wharton to follow them.

³⁸³ This incident has been recorded in numerous local history books but for a full account of it and of the subsequent trial see David Bentley, *The Sheffield Hanged 1750-1864* (Sheffield 2002), pp. 48-51.

The four made their way to another tavern, the Barrel, where Stevens had lodgings, and persuaded the landlady to cook the mutton, believing that Wharton would shortly join them. When he failed to arrive, they ate the mutton, paid the landlady and then Stevens went to bed and the other three returned to their respective homes.



Lady's Bridge by W. Botham, 1802

Figure 14: W. Botham Lady's Bridge, 1802

(Source: Author's Collection)

Wharton, in the meantime, had reported the incident to the constable, George 'Buggy' Eyre. From subsequent events and Wharton's own statements, it would seem likely that he exaggerated the circumstances surrounding the loss of the basket more from fear of Mrs. Wharton's reaction than from any desire to punish his friends. However, after discovering the basket containing the groceries, but no mutton, in Stevens' room, Eyre immediately set off for Broom

Hall, the home of the nearest magistrate Revd. James Wilkinson, which was about two miles outside the town. Wilkinson was roused from his bed in the early hours of Sunday morning and issued arrest warrants for Stevens, Lastley, Booth and Bingham.

Why both Eyre and Wilkinson reacted in this seemingly heavy-handed way is not known. The records show that there had been no trouble when Eyre had entered Stevens' room and that the basket had been handed over immediately. It is, of course, possible that Stevens and his companions could have been known troublemakers with whom Eyre had had problems before. Or they could have been amongst the growing number of people in Sheffield who were becoming politically active and who were espousing so-called radical ideas. At a time when there was growing concern in some quarters, both nationally and locally, that the spread of these ideas was a potential threat to the existing *status quo*, it is possible that the magistrates had instructed Eyre to watch certain people.

All four men were arrested in the early hours of Sunday morning and were brought before Wilkinson on the following day. At that time, the magistrates were using a room in the Cutlers' Hall – or 'Bang-beggar's Hall' as it was christened by the popular balladeer, Joseph Mather.³⁸⁴ Despite their own pleas and the evidence of witnesses that the incident was merely a drunken prank, Stevens and Lastley were committed to the Assizes at York Castle on a charge

³⁸⁴ Mather, *Bang Beggar* in Wilson, *Songs*, pp. 66-67.

of highway robbery; Booth and Bingham were remanded in custody until the end of October when they too were sent to York on the same charge.

Again, the question must be asked: why did Wilkinson over-react in such a way? Whilst he was, by no means, universally popular, Wilkinson was, reputedly, a firm but fair magistrate who preferred conciliation to instant retribution and he is known to have sent very few people to the Assizes.³⁸⁵ His decision to commit these men for trial for a capital offence is, therefore, surprising and suggests a certain amount of nervousness on his behalf and also, perhaps, a desire to reassert his authority. It can also be no coincidence that he took this decision on the same day as the Prince of Wales and his party, including the Duke of Norfolk, was expected to arrive at nearby Wentworth Woodhouse, the home of Earl Fitzwilliam.³⁸⁶ Wilkinson, who had been invited to the ball that was to be given in the Prince's honour, was, no doubt, eager to show the visiting dignitaries, and especially Earl Fitzwilliam himself, that he was in control of the situation in Sheffield. As the nearest resident aristocrat, Fitzwilliam, who was Lord of the Manor of Ecclesall and who owned a considerable amount of land in and around Sheffield, was, arguably, a more influential figure locally than the Duke of Norfolk. He kept himself fully apprised of events in the town and would have been well aware of the crisis

³⁸⁵ David Lunn, 'James Wilkinson, Vicar of Sheffield 1753-1805. A lecture given in Sheffield Cathedral by David Lunn, Bishop of Sheffield, on 22nd January 1997', p. 11; Mather, a frequent resident of the town's gaol, called Wilkinson a 'black diabolical fiend'. Mather, *The Black Resurrection in Wilson, Songs*, pp. 44-6.

³⁸⁶ *Sheffield Register*, September 4th 1789.

within the cutlery trades and of the growing popularity of the radical ideas that were being propounded by men like Enoch Trickett and Joseph Gales.³⁸⁷

The trial of Stevens, Booth, Lastley and Bingham took place at the end of March 1790. Stevens, Lastley and Booth were all found guilty of highway robbery. Stevens and Lastley were condemned to death and Booth to transportation for life. Bingham was deemed to have been a bystander who had taken no part in the crime and he was acquitted. He returned to Sheffield at a time when emotions were running high: the motion to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts had just been overwhelmingly defeated and, more importantly, the Freemen were actively campaigning for the amendments to the Act of Incorporation and, in the process, were highlighting the inequities and abuses of the existing system. His return also coincided with the meetings of the cutlery manufacturers and of the principal inhabitants of the town which had rejected most of the Freemen's proposed amendments to the Act. At that meeting, as noted in the previous chapter, a resolution had been passed declaring that the Freemen's proposals regarding the election of the Master Cutler, if implemented, 'would be greatly injurious to the Inhabitants of the Town of Sheffield by introducing dangerous Innovations'.³⁸⁸ It was into this

³⁸⁷ Fitzwilliam's knowledge of and concern about the situation in Sheffield is amply demonstrated in a series of letters relating to the activities of the S.S.C.I. Sheffield Archives, Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments, the correspondence of William Wentworth Fitzwilliam, 4th Earl Fitzwilliam.

³⁸⁸ *Sheffield Register*, April 2nd 1790.

maelstrom of emotions that Bingham brought the news that Stevens and Lastley were to be hung and Booth transported.

That evening (April 2nd 1790), a large and angry crowd gathered on Lady's Bridge, the scene of the 'crime'. Their anger was primarily directed against Wharton, who was accused of having exaggerated the circumstances surrounding the robbery in order to obtain 'blood money'.³⁸⁹ They marched on his house and erected a gibbet, complete with the figure of a man hanging from it, by his door. The authorities, who were undoubtedly already concerned about the underlying tension that was permeating the town, were alarmed at this outburst of public anger and, in an attempt to diffuse the situation, the Master Cutler called a public meeting during which a petition was drawn up and signed asking the King to grant the men a reprieve. The following morning, a deputation set off for London with the petition and, a few days later, a reprieve was granted. A messenger was sent from London to York where, after a much delayed journey, he arrived on April 19th 1790 - two days after Stevens and Lastley had been hung. Booth was subsequently granted a free pardon.

When news of the hanging reached Sheffield on April 22nd, there was 'much disturbance' in the town.³⁹⁰ Wharton's house was attacked, the door was broken

³⁸⁹ The statutory reward for securing a conviction for highway robbery was £40, so Wharton was eligible for £120 which he would have been expected to share with Constable Eyre.

³⁹⁰ *Sheffield Register*, April 23rd 1790.

down, windows smashed and the whole building was eventually set alight causing considerable damage to buildings surrounding it. Wharton and his wife fled - Wharton, reputedly, dressed in women's clothing – and were never seen in Sheffield again. Although calm does appear to have been restored within a few days, the incident was recorded in another of Mather's songs, *Stevens' and Lastley's Execution*. The regular singing of this song in workshops, taverns and in many other public places would have ensured that the sense of injustice and anger that the incident had aroused would have remained fresh in local minds.

Stevens' and Lastley's Execution

O Wharton, thou villain, most base,

Thy name must eternally rot;

Poor Stevens and Lastley's sad case

For ever thy conscience will blot.

Those victims, thou wickedly sold,

And into eternity hurl'd,

For lucre of soul sinking gold,

To set thee on foot in the world.

Some others were equally vile,

To prompt thee to this wicked work;

In order to share of the spoil,

Thou got by the blood spilt at York.

All are equally guilty with thee,
 And as a reward for their pains,
 They ought to be hung on a tree,
 And then be suspended in chains.³⁹¹

The Scissor-Grinders' Strike

For centuries, the Hallamshire cutlery trades had been dominated by countless independent small masters and the transition from journeyman to master had been relatively easy. In such circumstances, there had been no need for combinations to protect workers' rights and wages and strikes were unknown.³⁹² But by the end of the eighteenth century the situation had changed dramatically and a class of life-long journeymen had emerged. In 1790, frustrated by their dependence on an elite and powerful group of masters and emboldened by the newfound confidence amongst the Freemen, a group of scissor-grinders joined together to protest against changes that had been made to their piece-rates. All of these men would have been either journeymen or Freemen and it would be reasonable to assume that they were supporters of the Freemen's campaign.

³⁹¹ Mather, *Stevens & Lastley's Execution*, verses 1 and 4, in Wilson, *Songs*, pp. 21-22. For a full transcript of this song see Appendix B.

³⁹² A number of historians have claimed that there was a strike amongst the Sheffield cutlery workers in 1787 but I have been unable to find any evidence of this. I suspect that the confusion may have been caused by a misunderstanding of some of the notices that appeared in the local press relating to the Freemen's campaign. See, for example, Lloyd, *The Cutlery Trades*, p. 241; Dobson, *Masters and Journeymen*, p. 164; and Hey, *History*, p. 112.

It was a long-accepted practice within the cutlery trades that a grinders' dozen was not twelve but fourteen. To allow for the fact that blades were sometimes damaged or broken when they were being ground, manufacturers sent the grinders fourteen blades but only expected twelve to be returned – and, of course, they only paid for twelve. However, as well as allowing for errors on the behalf of the grinders, this system gave the grinders the opportunity to acquire materials illicitly – these were known as the 'perks of the trade'. Perquisites ('perks') were an accepted facet of most trades where 'putting-out' was commonplace and it was generally accepted within these trades that employees could appropriate small amounts of materials that they could use to make goods either for themselves or, more commonly, to sell. Periodically, masters attempted to combat this embezzlement by increasing the number of pieces they expected their workmen to produce from the material that they supplied but, inevitably, this caused resentment amongst the workers who not only believed that their wages were being reduced but that their customary rights were being threatened. There are numerous documented cases of the trade disputes that resulted: for example the Colchester weavers in 1757, the Leeds weavers in 1770, and the Manchester cabinet makers in 1778.³⁹³

³⁹³ John Rule, *The Experience of Labour in Eighteenth Century Industry* (London, 1981), p. 126; Dobson, *Masters and Journeymen*, p. 164. See also Peter D'Sena, 'Perquisites and Casual Labour on the London Wharfside in the Eighteenth Century', *The London Journal*, 14 (1989).

In the late spring or early summer of 1790, Jonathan Watkinson, a master scissor-smith who had been the Master Cutler in 1787, announced that, in future, he would count thirteen blades as a dozen. In other words, he would send the grinders thirteen blades, but still expect twelve to be returned.³⁹⁴ This decision infuriated the grinders who not only believed that their wages were being cut, but that, once again, the masters, and more significantly a master who was directly connected with the governing body of the Cutlers' Company, were infringing their rights. The decision also came at a time of heightened tension in the town as has been illustrated above. The crowd reacted to this attack on what they believed to be the *status quo* in the time-honoured way: by humiliating and vilifying the perpetrator in an attempt to shame him into changing his mind.³⁹⁵

Watkinson's humiliation is best illustrated in what is probably Joseph Mather's most famous song, *Watkinson and his Thirteens*:

³⁹⁴ Joseph Wilson, and many subsequent local historians, assumed that this was a decision made by the Cutlers' Company whilst Watkinson was the Master Cutler, i.e. between August 1787 and August 1788. However, I have been unable to find any evidence of this in the Company's records and believe that it was a decision Watkinson made as an independent manufacturer. See Joseph Wilson, *Songs*, p.65.

³⁹⁵ This is a good example of E. P. Thompson's 'moral economy of the English crowd'. Although Thompson used it in relation to food riots, Adrian Randall and Andrew Charlesworth have argued, convincingly, that it can be used in the context of workers who protested when they believed that their traditional rights and customs were being threatened – as the scissor-grinders were doing. See E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*; Adrian Randall, *Before the Luddites: Custom, Community and Machinery in the English Woollen Industry 1776-1809: Markets, Market Culture and Popular Protest in Eighteenth Century Britain and Ireland*, ed. Adrian Randall & Andrew Charlesworth; and Adrian Randall & Andrew Charlesworth, 'The Moral Economy': Riots, Markets and Social Conflict', in *Moral Economy and Popular Protest*, ed. Adrian Randall & Andrew Charlesworth.

That monster oppression, behold how he stalks,
 Keeps picking the bones of the poor as he walks,
 There's not a mechanic throughout this whole land
 But what more or less feels the weight of his hand;
 That offspring of tyranny, baseness and pride,
 Our rights hath invaded and almost destroyed,
 May that man be banished who villainy screens:
 Or sides with big W.....n with his thirteens.

Chorus

*And may the odd knife his great carcass dissect,
 Lay open his vitals for men to inspect,
 A heart full as black as the infernal gulph,
 In that greedy, blood-sucking, bone-scraping wolf*
 This wicked dissenter expelled his own church,
 Is render'd the subject of public reproach,
 Since reprobate marks on his forehead appear'd,
 We all have concluded his conscience is sear'd;
 See mammon his God, and oppression his aim,
 Hark! How the streets ring with his infamous name,
 The boys at the playhouse exhibit strange scenes
 Respecting big W.....n with his thirteens.³⁹⁶

³⁹⁶ Mather, *Watkinson and his Thirteens*, verses 1 and 2. in Wilson, *Songs*, pp. 63-5.

Mather highlighted the widespread belief that the customary ‘rights’ of the grinders were being stolen by a man who worshipped mammon, not God; a man who had been expelled from his Quaker community and who bore the devil’s mark on his face (‘reprobate marks on his forehead’).³⁹⁷ Watkinson was jeered in the streets (‘Hark! How the streets ring with his infamous name’) and the line ‘the boys at the playhouse exhibit strange scenes’ refers to an occasion when he entered the theatre and the gallery rose and sang Mather’s song – an incident which, reputedly, caused him to have a nervous breakdown.³⁹⁸ This was seen as just punishment by the crowd and as a lesson for any other masters who were tempted to act in the same way – sentiments that were echoed by Joseph Mather in *Watkinson’s Repentance*:

At length this old Wolf to repentance is brought,
 Who a long time in Sheffield hath wandered about,
 A large blackguard snatch of late he hath made,
 To pull down the prices of the cutlery trade.

It is every night when I go to my rest,
 My conscience doth constantly pierce thro’ my breast,
 I seldom can sleep, but I constantly dream
 I hear thousands shouting ‘I will have thirteen’.

³⁹⁷ I have been unable to ascertain why Watkinson was expelled from the Quaker community.

³⁹⁸ The first verse and the chorus were obviously written, and sung, before the second verse containing the reference to this incident was added.

Once I was walking the street up and down,
 The most that pass'd by me spoke with a frown,
 Singing 'there goes W.....n who hath lost his brain
 And never must recover his senses again'.

One night to the play I happened to go,
 But I could not rest long, they troubled me so,
 For before in the play-house long time I had been,
 The whole gallery shouted 'I will have thirteen.'

Come all Sheffield masters, take warning by me,
 For fear you should share the same fate you see,
 And never attempt poor men's bones for to scrape,
 Who daily do labour for all that they do get.³⁹⁹

However, the other leading master scissor-smiths did not learn from the treatment that had been meted out to Watkinson and they decided that they too would count thirteen as a dozen. Traditionally the grinders would have had the upper hand in any negotiations between themselves and manufacturers because, by the early decades of the eighteenth century, very few of the latter would

³⁹⁹ Mather, *Watkinson's Repentance*, verses 1 and 3-6, in Wilson, *Songs*, pp. 67-8.

have ground their own blades. Instead they would have 'put out' this work to independent grinders who worked at wheels on the banks of the rivers, most of which were sited outside of the town. This geographical separateness combined with their strong craft identity made the grinders quite distinct communities in the Hallamshire landscape. They were also commonly considered to be rough, hard men, very much at the lower end of the social spectrum. But by the end of the eighteenth century, many grinders were no longer independent but were tied, usually because of debts, to individual masters whilst others, like journeymen freemen throughout the trades, were increasingly forced to undercut their fellows in order to secure work. In fact, the reaction to Watkinson's decision is indicative of the power of men like him – the grinders were no longer in a position to refuse to work for a master who would not pay what was commonly considered to be a just price and so were forced to resort to a form of moral blackmail in an attempt to shame him into compliance. When this method failed and other scissor manufacturers decided to follow Watkinson's lead, some of the scissor-grinders realised that they too would be in a stronger position if they acted together. In early August 1790, they published a list of prices to which all scissor-grinders had agreed to abide. Unfortunately, no copies of this list have survived but from subsequent statements it is clear that the leaders of the group were David Chapman, Henry Clark, George Greaves, Joseph Holmes, William Pryor, Thomas Slack and John

Unwin.⁴⁰⁰ At least four of them (Clark, Holmes, Pryor and Slack) had had some previous involvement in the Freeman's campaign.⁴⁰¹

On August 17th 1790, thirty-four of the town's thirty-five leading scissor manufacturers attended a meeting chaired by John Henfrey, scissor-smith and Junior Warden of the Cutlers' Company, where they agreed that they would not pay the prices demanded by the grinders.⁴⁰² They also warned other cutlery manufacturers that there were plans to form similar combinations in every branch of the trades and urged them to attend the meeting that was to be held in the Cutlers' Hall on August 23rd to discuss the best means of checking 'such dangerous Combinations' that would not only threaten the cutlery trades but also the peace of the town. Once again, the manufacturing elite was raising the spectre of social chaos. In order to ensure that everyone was fully aware of the stance that they intended to take, they resolved that one thousand copies of their resolutions should be printed and distributed and that they should also be published in the *Sheffield Register* and the *Sheffield Advertiser*.⁴⁰³

Although the Freeman, who represented a significant percentage of those who were employed in the cutlery trades, had been in dispute with the Cutlers'

⁴⁰⁰ Sheffield Archives, JC1251-58.

⁴⁰¹ Pryor and Slack had signed the 1785 petition and Holmes and Clark were signatories on a petition that a small group of grinders had sent to the Cutlers' Company in January 1789 asking that they be allowed to take apprentices.

⁴⁰² The thirty-fifth, reportedly, had a prior engagement. *Sheffield Register*, August 20th 1790.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*; Sheffield Archives, JC1473.

Company, who represented a similarly significant percentage of the leading manufacturers (the employers), for over six years, this was the first time that the emotive term ‘combination’ had been used. ‘Combinations’ of workmen were a source of great concern to masters throughout the country because of the strength that they gave to the workmen to negotiate the terms and conditions of their employment – in fact, they were prohibited by Act of Parliament in some trades.⁴⁰⁴ The term was most often used when masters felt themselves to be financially threatened by their workforce and its use by the master scissormiths suggests that, up until now, they had not felt so threatened by the actions of the Freemen. It is possible that, initially, they had been confident that the Cutlers’ Company would not comply with the Freemen’s demands but that the situation had changed when men like Enoch Trickett, a successful master manufacturer himself, had become involved and the threat of reform being imposed by Parliament had become a distinct possibility. They would also have been concerned about the increasing radicalism of the Freemen, especially in the light of events in France.

Meanwhile, in a pamphlet entitled *An appeal to the second and better thoughts of the master scissormakers*, an anonymous commentator highlighted the irony of a society where it was acceptable for groups of gentlemen to meet to discuss

⁴⁰⁴ For example, combinations were prohibited amongst tailors by Acts passed in 1721 and 1767, in the woollen trade by an Act passed in 1726 and amongst hatters in 1777. Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (revised edition, London, 1991), p. 137.

how to improve the electoral system to better suit their needs and for groups of manufacturers to meet to decide how best to ‘oppress’ their journeymen, but not for those self same journeymen to meet how to protect their rights. Rhetorically, it questioned what constituted a ‘combination’:

Is the assembling of the Gentlemen of landed Property, to consult on the most proper Mode of obtaining a more equal Representation in Parliament? No. By no Means. Are the Meetings of a number of Gentlemen to preserve or increase the Value of their landed Property? No. Are the Meetings of the various Tribes of Cornfactors, Forestallers, Engrossers or Hucksters (those Pests of the English Nation, who prey on the Labours of the Poor?) No. Is it the Meeting of the Master Filemakers, Scissormakers, and others, at the *Hotel*, the *Tontine* and several other Places, to consult on Means how to keep their Journeymen to themselves, that they may the more easily and effectually oppress them? Oh! No. What then is an unlawful Combination? Why. Strange to tell it, the Meeting of the Scissor Grinders, to put a final Stop, if possible, to the Master Scissormakers, throwing away the fruit of their honest Labour. to the great Detriment of the Trade in General.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁵ Sheffield Archives, JC1370.

The author accused the scissor manufacturers of peddling 'invidious Falshoods [sic]' firstly when they claimed that the grinders had united to increase their wages when in fact they had united to preserve them 'as every industrious Man would his Property from a Robber'; and secondly when they claimed to have the support of all of the town's leading scissor manufacturers, when they plainly did not. He believed that they wanted to reduce those manufacturers 'who are not so opulent as yourselves' to journeymen and 'to stir up the Magistrates against us'. This last statement implies that the author of the pamphlet was a scissor-grinder but its style and content suggests someone of a higher social class who was relatively well educated. He was obviously someone who was aware of organisations such as the Association movement and the Society for Constitutional Information and who was well versed in the emotive language of the time. In fact, the language and tone is so similar to that used in some of the Freemen's previous publications that it was most probably written either by or in consultation with one of their letter writers. It was also written by someone who had easy access to the services of a printer because *An appeal to ... the master scissormakers* was published on August 20th, just one day after the publication of the resolutions that had been agreed by the scissor manufacturers at their meeting on August 17th. Or, of course, it could have been written by the printer himself. Three of the four printers who were working in Sheffield at that time are known to have printed material for the Freemen - Jonathan Brunt, John Crome and Joseph Gales - and Crome and Gales were both subsequently to become members of the S.S.C.I. This suggests that they

would have supported the sentiments outlined in *An appeal*.⁴⁰⁶ However, the closing lines of *An appeal* - ‘Oh Truth, Benevolence, Charity, Virtue pure. leave not our British Isle!’ – are so redolent of Gales’ editorials that even if he were not the author of the piece, it would seem very likely that he had a hand in its composition.

One aspect of workers’ combinations that particularly alarmed masters, in all trades, was their ability to organise ‘rolling strikes’, when disputes moved from one workshop to the next, usually as a result of deliberate planning by the combination’s leaders. This had happened in the Exeter wool trade just three years earlier when three journeymen woollsorters told their master that unless he increased their wages, they would leave his service. He refused and so they left and went to work for someone else. The following week, the same happened in two other workshops. All the journeymen involved were members of the same branch of the Woolstaplers’ Society and surviving records reveal that they had been planning their action for some time and had even built up a ‘strike fund’.⁴⁰⁷ There is some evidence to suggest that a rolling strike was being planned in the Hallamshire scissor trade because on August 23rd 1790, the same day on which masters from all branches of the cutlery trades met to discuss their plan of campaign, the scissor forgers, filers and finishers held a meeting to

⁴⁰⁶ Crome, who later (c.1795) became a member of the more radical United Englishmen, was described by Arthur Jewitt junior as being ‘a Jacobite’ who had no love for the Hanoverian monarchy. Jewitt, ‘Passages’, p. 143.

⁴⁰⁷ John Rule, ‘Industrial Disputes, Wage Bargaining and the Moral Economy’, in Randall and Charlesworth, *Moral Economy and Popular Protest*, pp. 171-173.

discuss how they could regulate the prices that they charged the manufacturers. Three days later, another meeting was held for all workmen involved in the scissor trade ‘to consider such methods as may be thought most proper to put a stop to the reducing of our prices, which we find gradually decreasing to the destruction of trade and the oppression of honest industry’.⁴⁰⁸ Unfortunately, the outcome of this meeting is not known.

George Wood, a scissor-smith and Senior Warden of the Cutlers’ Company, chaired the meeting of the leading manufacturers on August 23rd, further emphasising to the public at large the alliance between the manufacturers and the Company. They resolved to subscribe to a fund to prosecute the instigators of the ‘combination’ and they asked the Master Cutler, Joseph Ward, to call a meeting to discuss their resolution that a petition should be submitted to Parliament requesting that the Act of Incorporation be amended to obtain ‘such Regulations as may be thought Necessary and more Adequate to the present improv’d state of the severall Trades’.⁴⁰⁹ The Master Cutler did so and the meeting was held three days later and was chaired by John Henfrey. Those present resolved that they would not pay the prices demanded by the grinders who, they asserted, already earned between ten and eighteen pence an hour and some as much as two shillings, and they agreed to enter into a subscription to support any measures deemed necessary to suppress ‘the unlawful

⁴⁰⁸ Sheffield Archives. JC1474.

⁴⁰⁹ Sheffield Archives. JC1252-80 and JC1371.

Combination' of the scissor-grinders and any other combination entered into by those in any branch of the cutlery trades. A committee was appointed to implement these measures and its members were also instructed to call on all those manufacturers who had not attended the meeting 'to acquaint them with the dangerous and unwarrantable Combination of the Scissor-grinders' and to request their support. Significantly, this committee was not only comprised of representatives of all of the branches of the cutlery trades but also included silversmiths, a toolmaker, a tavern owner, the agent of the Sun Fire Insurance company and two schoolmasters – those who considered themselves to be amongst Sheffield's social elite were beginning to unite in the face of the threat posed by their social inferiors. Finally, the meeting re-iterated that the Master Cutler should be requested urgently to seek an amendment to the Act of Incorporation. However, they also sought to retain some control over any proposed amendments by requesting that the proposed bill should be shown to the manufacturers for their approval.⁴¹⁰

The scissor-grinders responded through a circular letter in which they accused the manufacturers of spreading 'flagrant and nefarious falsehoods'. Scissor-grinders did not and could not earn the amounts of money that the manufacturers had claimed, but they were regularly defrauded by manufacturers

⁴¹⁰ Sheffield Archives, JC1372 and 1564. These are both printed copies of the resolutions. One is addressed to John Jervis who, earlier in the year, had been appointed by the Freemen as one of their arbitrators (see chapter 4). It is probable, therefore, that he was one of the master manufacturers who had not attended the meeting.

who entered one price in their books but, in fact, paid a much lower one. They asked ‘the Freemen and others’ to consider whether ‘the late malpractices’ of the Cutlers’ Company, who, they said, had illegally allowed too many people to be employed in the trades, were not designed to lower the cost of labour and that, if this was the case, to consider whether the Members were, in fact, ‘the proper objects against whom prosecution should be commenced’. They concluded the letter by asking each branch of the cutlery trades to send a representative to a meeting that was to be held on August 31st when they would be asked to give the grinders ‘their best advice and instruction’.⁴¹¹

By the beginning of September 1790, the scissor trade was almost at a standstill.⁴¹² The majority of scissorgrinders had joined the strike and would only grind blades for the prices that had been agreed in their published statement. Consequently, the major manufacturers were refusing to send their blades to them and, as a result, they had stockpiles of unground blades in their warehouses. Because of this, they were not placing orders for new blades which meant that there was little work for the scissor forgers. Similarly, because blades were not being ground, there was little or no work for those who did the follow-on processes – setters and polishers, for example. This, of course, had a detrimental knock-on effect on the industries that supplied both the scissor trade and the scissor-smiths and their families.

⁴¹¹ Sheffield Archives, JC1373.

⁴¹² *Sheffield Register*, August 27th 1790.

On September 2nd 1790, in the midst of all this financial hardship, the Cutlers' Company held the annual Cutlers' Feast, an event that was designed to demonstrate the power and influence of the Company to both the local populace and to out-of-town guests.⁴¹³ Coincidentally, the Feast of 1790 is the first for which detailed records survive. These records reveal that it was attended by over 250 guests, including the great and good of Sheffield (but not Joseph Gales), and that 'the Dinner was composed of every delicious viand that could be procured, the Dessert was elegant, and the Wines of the first flavour'.⁴¹⁴ At a time when the economic, social and, increasingly, the political divides within Sheffield were becoming more pronounced, when the town was beset by the long and acrimonious dispute within the cutlery trades, and when many were suffering financial hardship because of the scissorgrinders' strike (a strike that the grinders blamed on the actions of men like the Wardens of the Cutlers' Company, George Wood and John Henfrey), this overt display of opulence and power accentuated the divide between 'the haves and the have-nots', between those who were part of the circle of the Cutlers' Company and those who were not. Inevitably, it would have aggravated tensions between the groups and one can imagine that the mood of the crowd that, traditionally, gathered around the Cutlers' Hall to watch the arrival and departure of the Feast guests was quite hostile and, perhaps, intimidating.

⁴¹³ For a more detailed examination of the social and economic significance of the Cutlers' Feast, see Julie MacDonald, 'The Cutlers' Feast' in Binfield and Hey, *Mesters to Masters*, pp. 225-240.

⁴¹⁴ CCA, P8/1; *Sheffield Register* September 3rd 1790.

Six days later, on September 8th 1790, the committee that had been appointed by the scissor manufacturers reported that all efforts to persuade the scissor-grinders to return to work had failed and that the strike was spreading. They called upon the Master Cutler ‘to take this Business under his protection’ by summoning a meeting of the town’s principal manufacturers and inhabitants to decide what should be done ‘to suppress the unlawful Combination’.⁴¹⁵

The Master Cutler, Joseph Ward, acted swiftly and the meeting was held in the Cutlers’ Hall on the following day under the chairmanship of John Parsons, a silver manufacturer. It was also attended by several scissor-grinders who asked for the matter to be placed before independent arbitrators, but this request was unanimously, and contemptuously, rejected by the gentlemen and manufacturers who claimed that it was ‘utterly impossible for any Description of Men to draw a Line for the Conduct of any Manufacturer, or fix the Prices of Work’.⁴¹⁶ Instead, they resolved that ‘vigorous Measures’ should be adopted to defeat the scissor-grinders. They also resolved to enter into a subscription to finance their campaign and appointed a committee to oversee the matter and to enlist the support of those master manufacturers who had not attended the meeting. Significantly, in view of the poor state of the relationship between the Cutlers’ Company and Freeman, this committee included the Master Cutler, both Wardens and five other serving Members.

⁴¹⁵ Sheffield Archives, JC1252-81.

⁴¹⁶ Sheffield Archives, JC1374.

One of the ‘vigorous Measures’ adopted by the committee was a letter written by the Master Cutler to the authorities in neighbouring towns and villages asking them to arrest any grinders who came to their towns trying to raise money for their cause and to prosecute them as ‘Rogues and Vagabonds’.⁴¹⁷ They also began to investigate the possibility of prosecuting the strike’s ringleaders.⁴¹⁸

Whilst prosecutions of strikers were not unusual in the eighteenth century, they were generally seen as a last resort because most masters preferred to end disputes on good terms with their workers in order to avoid long-term resentment.⁴¹⁹ However, one recent dispute that had been ended by a prosecution was the one in the Exeter wool trade mentioned above. There the woolstaplers had combined to prosecute their journeymen because they were alarmed at their growing strength, and this was undoubtedly the reason why the scissor manufacturers decided to follow the same course of action and why they were supported in this decision by a significant number of masters in other trades.⁴²⁰ After all, if the scissor-grinders were successful in undermining the authority of their masters, other journeymen were bound to follow suit.

⁴¹⁷ Sheffield Archives, TC352-2. This letter is dated September 13th 1790.

⁴¹⁸ Sheffield Archives, JC1538. This is a manuscript summary of an Act of Parliament passed in 1749/50 (22 George II) and of other unidentified statutes relating to disputes between masters and their workmen. It has been signed by eight master scissor-smiths and was probably a summary of the legislation that the manufacturers proposed to use to prosecute the scissor-grinders’ leaders.

⁴¹⁹ Rule, *Experience*, p. 177.

⁴²⁰ Rule, ‘Industrial Disputes’, p. 174.

The scissor-grinders' leaders were arrested in mid-September 1790 on a charge of having kept goods from their masters for eight days during which time they had refused to grind them. They were brought before the magistrate, R. A. Athorpe, on September 21st 1790.⁴²¹ Five of them were found guilty. The others were acquitted because although they had refused to grind the blades they had not kept them for eight days.⁴²² Four of the five convicted men were sent to Wakefield House of Correction for three months, and the other was sent for one month.⁴²³ As was the custom at the time, these men would have been chained together and marched out of the town and on to the road to Wakefield.⁴²⁴ One can imagine that this spectacle would have further aggravated tensions within the town.

Joseph Mather eloquently echoed the mood of the grinders and their supporters in a song entitled *Hallamshire Haman* in which George Wood, scissor manufacturer and Senior Warden of the Cutlers' Company, was lambasted as the villain of the piece. The song itself is based on the story of Haman and Mordecai in the Book of Esther: George Wood is Haman who, having failed to

⁴²¹ R. A. Athorpe was considered to be a harsher magistrate than James Wilkinson. In August 1795, he was to gain notoriety as the officer who, with sword raised, rode through a large crowd in Norfolk Street that had refused to follow his orders and disperse. Two people were killed but Athorpe was exonerated.

⁴²² Unfortunately, it is not known how many men were arrested.

⁴²³ *Sheffield Register*, September 24th 1790. Unfortunately, the five convicted men are not named but it would be reasonable to assume that they were among the seven named above.

⁴²⁴ Bentley, *Sheffield Hanged*, p. 3.

destroy his enemy, Mordecai (the scissor-grinders' leader), vows to destroy all of his people (the grinders):

This 'Hallamshire Haman' keeps blacks at command,
 To spread his dire mandates throughout the whole land,
 Together they meet and their malice combine
 To form a most hellish, infernal design.
 On malice, on mischief, and tyranny bent,
 Five poor honest grinders to prison they sent;
 Though nothing they had of these men to complain,
 But not paying discount for wearing a chain.⁴²⁵

With the imprisonment of their leaders, the strike quickly came to an end and the rest of the scissor-grinders went back to work. But the dispute left behind a long-term legacy of bitterness, resentment and suspicion. The manufacturers had united not only with manufacturers in other trades but also with many of the town's principal inhabitants to defeat the grinders who, in the opinion of many journeymen and 'little mesters' (both within the cutlery trades and without) had been fighting to preserve their customary rights. The draconian way in which the strike had been ended only served to widen the gulf between the two groups.

⁴²⁵ Mather, *Hallamshire Haman*, verse 3, in Wilson, *Songs*, pp. 31-2. For a full transcript of this song see Appendix C.

Conclusion

By the early autumn of 1790, there were many people in Sheffield who felt frustrated, angry and even betrayed by a combination of national and local developments. The Dissenters' aggressive campaign to secure the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and their vociferous and enthusiastic support for the reforms taking place in France had rebounded on them: their motion to have the Acts repealed had been overwhelmingly defeated and they themselves were now tainted in some eyes as radicals or, even worse, as republicans who wanted to see the overthrow of the British Constitution and the British way of life. For those who wanted parliamentary and electoral reform, the election of June 1790 had highlighted many of the inequalities of the existing system where a thriving town like Sheffield had no direct representation in Parliament whilst a village like Old Sarum, with an electorate of just one, had two representatives. And in an angry yet eloquent diatribe, Gales had drawn his readers' attention to the empty promises of politicians who needed only to refer to their voters every seven years. To many the message was clear – the people of Sheffield had no voice in the running of their country.

But of far greater consequence for Sheffield, both in the short and in the long term, was the effect that the feelings aroused by local issues were having on relationships within the community. Many people felt frustrated, angry and even afraid and the source of those frustrations was daily before them on the streets of the town.

The Freeman were frustrated and angry that their dispute with the Cutlers' Company had still not been resolved. Under the influence of charismatic leaders like Enoch Trickett, many of them had come to believe that the only way to resolve their grievances was by amending the Act of Incorporation and particularly by amending it to give them a voice in the election of the Company's officers. But their attempts to do this had been consistently opposed by the Company and lately by others amongst the town's principal inhabitants. These were the men who claimed that the Freeman's proposals would 'disturb the Peace of the Town' and 'produce Disorder and Confusion' and they were the same men who combined to defeat the scissorgrinders – fellow Freeman who had been fighting for their rights.⁴²⁶ At the same time, there were some Freeman who felt betrayed by their own leaders who they believed wanted the Cutlers' Company to be reformed to suit themselves rather than the majority of cutlers. These men continued to believe that the majority would only benefit if the Company reinforced all of its existing rules and regulations.

Meanwhile, the principal cutlery manufacturers and many of the town's principal inhabitants were becoming concerned about the burgeoning sense of solidarity amongst the working classes and the strength that this, potentially, could give them when negotiating with their employers. They had been alarmed not only by the scissor-grinders' strike but also by the fact that it had been so well organised and co-ordinated. The strikers had been supported by many

⁴²⁶ CCA, C9/2, Company minute book, May 2nd 1789.

other workers, both within the cutlery industry and without, and, more alarmingly, they had also been supported by men who were perceived to be radicals – their leaders, for example, who had previously been active in the Freeman’s dispute, Joseph Mather, and probably even Joseph Gales. Fuelled by events in France and the creeping suspicion in some quarters that those who advocated radical reform at home wanted to see similar events take place in Britain, many of the town’s principal inhabitants were suspicious, and perhaps even fearful, of those who they believed to be radicals in their own community – men who sang songs that humiliated and derided Members of the Company and who, as in the case of Stevens and Lastly, had shown themselves willing to resort to violence when they felt aggrieved. Suspicion and fear of a common ‘enemy’ was also helping to foster a sense of solidarity amongst the town’s employer classes.

In an article entitled ‘Eighteenth-century English society: class struggle without class?’, E. P. Thompson argued that class-consciousness develops when

... people find themselves in a society structured in determined ways (crucially, but not exclusively, in productive relations), they experience exploitation (or the need to maintain power over those whom they exploit), they identify points of antagonistic interest, they commence to struggle around these issues and in

the process of struggling they discover themselves as classes.

they come to know this discovery as class-consciousness.⁴²⁷

By the autumn of 1790, the people of Sheffield were developing a strong sense of class-consciousness. For centuries, relationships in the town had been dominated by the ‘vertical consciousness of the Trade’, when masters and men had shared the common experience of small independent workshops and when the transition from journeyman to master was an attainable ambition for the majority.⁴²⁸ Then, solidarity had come from craft fellowship. But this was rapidly being replaced by the ‘horizontal consciousness’ of socio-economic class.⁴²⁹ Sheffield was becoming deeply divided between ‘us and them’, as is eloquently illustrated by Joseph Mather’s songs. It was a town where feelings of suspicion, frustration and anger that had been engendered by local issues had been considerably exacerbated by events occurring both in the nation at large and abroad, and where simmering tensions had already caused an eruption of violence. Many people believed that unless and until the dispute within the cutlery trades was resolved, the situation would only get worse. But despite the intervention of Members of Parliament and independent arbitrators, the two sides were seemingly no nearer agreement than they had been in 1784. In fact, the scissor-grinders’ strike and the role played by Members of the Company in

⁴²⁷ E. P. Thompson, ‘Eighteenth-century English society: class struggle without class?’, *Social History*, 3 (1978), p. 149.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*

its defeat had soured relationships even further. In October 1790, with suspicion and resentment rife on both sides, the prospect of a settlement seemed bleak indeed.

CHAPTER SIX

The Act of 1791

Introduction

By the autumn of 1790, it was obvious to many people that the dispute within the cutlery trades, which had been further aggravated by the scissorgrinders' strike, was not only damaging the economy but also the social fabric of the town. But, despite the intervention of the local Members of Parliament, the situation remained deadlocked. This chapter will examine how the intervention of a third group, who styled themselves the Committee of Master Manufacturers, enabled the deadlock to be broken and, eventually, a joint bill to be presented to the House of Commons. It will also examine the terms of the subsequent Act and its impact on both the Freemen and the Cutlers' Company.

The Cutler's Company's proposals to amend the Act of Incorporation

Two weeks after the five scissor-grinders were sent to the Wakefield House of Correction, the Cutlers' Company resolved to petition Parliament for an amendment to the Act of Incorporation.⁴³⁰ The strike, rising tension in the town and, more importantly, the resolutions of the principal manufacturers calling on the Master Cutler urgently to seek an amendment had, finally, persuaded them to take the initiative. They were also aware that the Freemen had, once again, turned to the courts for support – this time it was to Chancery.

⁴³⁰ CCA, C9/2, Company minutes, October 8th 1790.

For some time, the Freeman had believed that the Members had been misappropriating Company funds. Quite why they believed this is not clear. The Company's accounts appear to be correct but as they were the responsibility of each Master Cutler there is no way of knowing if all of the monies that they received were recorded. It is possible that Enoch Trickett saw something suspicious when he was allowed supervised access to the books in March 1789 or it could have been that the Freeman believed (and, possibly, justified to themselves) that misappropriation of Company funds was the reason why some cutlers had succeeded whilst others had not.⁴³¹ It is also possible that the Freeman were making a political point by attempting to hold their governors to account. When they asked to see the Company's books, however, the Company had refused – and the Freeman then asked Chancery to compel them to do so.⁴³²

In their deposition to the court, the Freeman accused the previous year's Master Cutler (Thomas Tillotson) and the current Master and Wardens (Joseph Ward, George Wood and John Henfrey) of using monies collected in fines that should have been used for the benefit of poor cutlers for their own benefit and of doing the same with monies raised through the Sitwell Charity; of failing to collect some fines; of loaning Company money to their friends at a low rate of interest;

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, March 4th 1789.

⁴³² Arthur Jewitt had asked to see the books for the previous twenty years in September 1789. *Ibid.*, September 25th 1789.

and of failing to pass all surplus funds to their successors.⁴³³ The court decided that there was a case to be answered and the named Members were subpoenaed to answer the charge.⁴³⁴ Unfortunately, there are no records to indicate the progress of this case and it is probable that in the wake of subsequent events it was eventually abandoned.

The Company, meanwhile, was determined that they should be seen to be proactive and that their proposals for amending the Act of Incorporation should be made known to as many people as possible. In order to do this, they ordered that the proposals should be advertised for three consecutive weeks in both of the local newspapers and that one thousand handbills should be published and distributed throughout Hallamshire.⁴³⁵ This was a novel move for the Company which, as has been previously noted, had been in the habit of changing the byelaws without informing the majority of the Freemen and it is indicative of the fact that they had, at last, come to realise that they needed to garner support from all of their members. It is also possible that they were hoping to appeal to

⁴³³ NA/C12/2427/1. Francis Sitwell had been Clerk to the Company from 1719 to 1736. When he died, in 1741, he bequeathed £400 to the Cutlers' Company to establish a charity to help poor cutlers by advancing them loans of up to £5 on security of cutlery wares and tools. These were kept in a storehouse. The charity's accounts were kept separately from the main Company accounts and over the years it was administered by numerous past Masters Cutler, most of who appear to have failed miserably in their task. It continued to be distributed until about 1805 after which time any remaining money appears to have been subsumed into the general Company funds.

⁴³⁴ CCA, C9/2, Company minute book, November 3rd 1790.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, October 8th 1790.

the moderates, particularly those working in the outlying villages, and thus undermine the authority of the Freemen's Committee.

The proposals themselves reveal that the Company, unsurprisingly, whilst willing to concede on minor points, was determined to retain total control over the trades.⁴³⁶ For example, they acknowledged that it was no longer feasible for King's Bench to be the sole court of appeal and suggested that, in future, all cutlers should have the right of appeal at Quarter Sessions. However, the Members would retain the authority to impose penalties upon any cutler for breaches of the Company's rules although they proposed that the local Justices of the Peace should be given the power to enforce those penalties. In contrast, it will be remembered that the Freemen wanted the establishment of a 'cutlers' jury'. The Company proposed that the rule of one man/one craft/one mark should be strictly reinforced and that only Freemen should be allowed to take apprentices, but were insistent that all indentures had to be recorded before a Member of the Company. Controversially, they also proposed that for a fee of £50 'foreigners' would be allowed to go into partnership with Freemen and be given a mark. By setting the fee so high, they were, effectively, restricting this 'privilege' to a few wealthy cutlers and investors. They also wanted to be

⁴³⁶ Edward Royle has argued that this was a tactic that was often used by the British governing class in the eighteenth century: they were usually 'willing to concede in detail while maintaining the essentials of power by all the means at [their] disposal'. He suggests that this was the reason why Britain avoided revolution in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries. Edward Royle, *Revolutionary Britannia? Reflections on the Threat of Revolution in Britain 1789-1848* (Manchester, 2000), p.10.

allowed to use Company funds to prosecute anyone who offended against the Act 'or otherwise for the benefit of the Company in such manner as the Master, Wardens, Searchers and Assistants, or the major Part of them, shall from time to time order or direct'.⁴³⁷ These last two proposals were bound to infuriate the majority of the Freemen. Unsurprisingly, the Company also wanted the system for choosing its officers to remain unchanged.

The publication of these proposals resulted in a flurry of correspondence to the *Register* indicating that they had inspired some lively debates in Sheffield and, probably, throughout Hallamshire. One correspondent, in fact, asked if anyone could tell him where the precise boundaries of Hallamshire were and by what, if any, Act of Parliament they had been established.⁴³⁸ This was a pertinent question because the Incorporating Act had given the Cutlers' Company jurisdiction over the proscribed trades in Hallamshire and 'sixe miles compasse of the same' and, consequently, any changes to it would affect a great many people. The principal cause of confusion was the phrase 'sixe miles compasse of the same', an area which had never been formally defined – in fact the phrase had only been included to ensure that the cutlers of Eckington, Newbould, and Whittington, who had placed themselves under the jurisdiction of the Cutlers' Jury in 1614, were part of the new Company.⁴³⁹ It was a question that also

⁴³⁷ CCA, C9/2. Company minute book October 8th 1790.

⁴³⁸ *Sheffield Register*, October 22nd 1790.

⁴³⁹ CCA, C6/1. The boundaries of the Company's jurisdiction were not formally defined until 1883 when the Cutlers' Company became a sub-office of the National Trademark Office.

concerned the wealthy Rotherham ironfounder Joseph Walker, who wrote to William Wilberforce seeking clarification. Wilberforce was able to reassure him that although Rotherham was within the boundaries of the Company's jurisdiction, Walker's branch of the metal trades was not.⁴⁴⁰

The most interesting correspondence, however, related to the role of regulatory bodies like the Cutlers' Company. One correspondent, signing himself 'A Bystander', eloquently argued the case put forward by contemporary proponents of free trade: the only purpose of monopolies was to support young industries and once these industries were established, all protection and restraints should be removed and the industries should be allowed to flourish or decline as trade demanded. If they were not removed, they

... have been, and ever will be found, impediments and obstructions to their future growth, and never fail to operate in reducing them towards their former infant state of imbecility.

They may be aptly compared to *Go-carts* for Children, which would be grievous indeed were we always obliged to walk in them.⁴⁴¹

The Cutlers' Company's proposals, he continued, would not only hamper economic growth in the cutlery trades (and, possibly, destroy the trades

⁴⁴⁰ William Wilberforce to Joseph Walker, March 18th 1791. Quoted in Michael L. Walker, 'William Wilberforce at Rotherham', *T.H.A.S.*, 8 (1963), p. 60.

⁴⁴¹ *Sheffield Register*, October 29th 1790.

altogether) but would also have an adverse effect both on the economy of Hallamshire and of the nation as a whole. He was particularly scathing about the Company's proposal that 'only those who have served an apprenticeship and been admitted to the Freedom should be allowed to carry on the trades or any part or branch of the trades'.⁴⁴² This proposal, he argued,

... means to establish an oppressive monopoly which would deeply affect every other trade in the town and neighbourhood, and perhaps annihilate the Cutlery Manufactory here. This and the following resolve could not possibly have been better formed to serve the purposes of our Rivals in Trade – no, not if one of the French National Assembly had drawn them up. They well know the advantage of having trade free from restraint; and if Britons do not soon open their eyes, their Folly may be observed too late to be checked.⁴⁴³

The opposing economic view was put forward by 'A Freeman by Servitude' whose choice of *nom de plume* proudly proclaimed his belief that he had a right to comment upon the affairs of the Cutlers' Company, unlike 'A Bystander' whom he believed to be 'no cutler'.⁴⁴⁴ 'A Freeman', however, was probably not an 'ordinary' working cutler. His letter, which is written in a gushing sentimental style, is sprinkled with Latin phrases and reveals a good knowledge

⁴⁴² CCA, C9/2, Company minute book October 8th 1790.

⁴⁴³ *Sheffield Register*, October 29th 1790.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, November 12th 1790.

of British constitutional history. He agreed that liberty was essential to commerce - not the kind of liberty that was proposed by 'A Bystander', but 'true liberty' supported by law, the same kind of liberty, in fact, that had been enshrined in Magna Charta:

True Liberty is like the Star which appeared to the Eastern Magi, and conducted them to Bethlehem where the Prince of Laws and Liberty had arisen. This Star surely conducted our immortal forefathers, when upon the plains of Runnymede they forced an unwilling King to sign their Charta, that glorious Compendium of Laws which hath stood for ages the unshaken palladium of British Freedom. Tyrants, Rebels and Robbers are common enemies to Law; but good laws are ever dear to the prudent; wise Regulations are the Body-guard of Liberty.⁴⁴⁵

Freemen, he continued, had bought their liberty and its associated privileges with at least seven hard years of servitude – 'They have risen up early and laid down late, and eaten the bread of sorrows. Many a time have they watered their scanty allowance of oaten bread with their tears' – and the duty of the Cutlers' Company was to protect those hard-won privileges, a duty that he admitted had been sadly neglected of late. But now wise counsel had prevailed and the Company was seeking to re-assert its authority. He sought to appeal to the Freemen at large, and indeed to working men throughout the town, by asking if

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

their labour should not be regarded as their property and, as such, valued as highly as if it had been bought with gold.

John Locke had promoted this concept of labour as property a century earlier but it was shortly to assume far greater significance in the arguments that were to be propounded by Thomas Paine and other radicals.⁴⁴⁶ As an obviously educated man, 'A Freeman' would, undoubtedly, have been aware of the works of Locke but the fact that he used this particularly argument to appeal to the Freemen at large suggests that he, like Joseph Gales, may have met Paine and have been acquainted with the theories that Paine would later expound in *Rights of Man*. More interestingly, however, his use of this argument suggests that he also knew that it would be both understood and accepted by the Freemen. This does raise the interesting possibility that many of the Freemen may also have known of, and indeed been converts of, Paine's theories long before they were published.

'A Freeman' concluded his letter by appealing to his fellow Freemen to unite behind their Company and not behind those whose actions would destroy it: 'unanimity may yet preserve us' he warned 'but if our discords are continued: FAREWELL to every HOPE! We can then do no more than look back with a sigh, and say *Troja fuit*.'⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁶ Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*, p.248.

⁴⁴⁷ The phrase '*Troja fuit*' is usually translated as 'Troy was, but is no more'. It can be found in both Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Virgil's *Aeneid*.

‘A Bystander’ was not persuaded by these arguments and replied that those who were apprenticed to the cutlery trades suffered no more or less than those who were apprenticed to any other trade. Consequently, they were not entitled to any special privileges. The privileges enjoyed by Freemen of the Cutlers’ Company were not, as they claimed, rights but impediments that hindered trade. Other countries, particularly France, were encouraging their industries by removing all restraints and he was certain that the British government knew that such actions were necessary at home if the country was to retain its great trading position:

But the growing necessity of removing these iniquitous obstacles, by discouraging all monopolies, &c, is at this time-a-day too well understood by our legislators, to allow us to entertain a suspicion of their affording any support to privileges so injurious to the neighbourhood of all such corporations, and now so evidently ruinous in the extreme to a commercial nation like ours, whose power and consequence depend wholly upon trade and manufactures.⁴⁴⁸

The Master Manufacturers

As well as inspiring debate on the role of regulatory bodies and the advantages and disadvantages of the economic policy of free trade, the publication of the

⁴⁴⁸ *Sheffield Register*, November 19th 1790.

Cutlers' Company's proposals led to the emergence of a third distinct party within the cutlery trades. This party styled themselves 'The Committee of Master Manufacturers'. Master manufacturers were Freemen who were employers rather than employees; who sold their goods, not their labour; and who manufactured, or had manufactured for them, goods that they sold directly to the consumer. There were approximately 10-12,000 people directly employed in the local cutlery trades in 1790 of whom only about five hundred were master manufacturers.⁴⁴⁹ The Members of the Cutlers' Company were all master manufacturers and while many of the five hundred would have supported their proposals, we have already seen that a few (Enoch Trickett for example) supported the Freemen. There would, inevitably, have also been some who supported the removal of all restraints and restrictions on trade. Unfortunately, it is not known how many of the master manufacturers supported this new group. They claimed that their reasons for intervening at this stage originated 'from a Wish to reconcile the contending Parties', but it is more likely that they (like many others who were alarmed at the damage that the dispute was causing to the cutlery trades, the local economy and social relationships within the town) realised that the longer the situation was allowed to continue, and to deteriorate, the more long-lasting the damage would be.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁹ These estimates are based on the figures quoted in the Freemen's Petition of 1785 (CCA, S11/1) and on the fact that just over 500 manufacturers are listed in the 1787 *Sheffield Directory*.

⁴⁵⁰ *Sheffield Register*, November 12th 1790.

One way or another, the dispute would have to be resolved soon and they were keen to ensure that it was done in a way that suited them.

In a rousing handbill, the Committee of Master Manufacturers announced to the Freemen that ‘at length Men of Weight and Property have opened their Eyes to the Justice of your Cause’ and informed them that these men had proposed ‘Terms of Accommodation’ to resolve the dispute ‘which no reasonable Mind can refuse’.⁴⁵¹ They urged the Freemen not to give up hope but to persevere because the day that they had longed for was now in sight:

And now Fellow Freemen let us wish you Joy! After a long and dark Night, the Morning of your Hopes, the long wished for Morning appears. Do not suffer your Spirits to flag! You have fought with the Spirit of Britons ...

They warned them to be aware of men who offered friendship but who would use them to further their own cause:

Scorn the Suggestion of artful Men, who under the Mask of Friendship only wish well to themselves. Judas mingled with, and was accounted a Disciple, but his only Aim was to carry the Scrip. BEWARE of insidious PRETENDERS, who would betray your Cause with a Kiss!

⁴⁵¹ Sheffield Local Studies Library, MP428M. For a full transcript of this document see Appendix D. Unfortunately, the names of the committee members are not known.

This was an accusation that undoubtedly could have been levelled against many members of the Committee of Master Manufacturers, but the fact that their leaders included the two men whom the Freemen had chosen to act as their arbitrators, Robert Barnard and John Jervis - men whom they, presumably, trusted - appears to have blinded the Freemen to this possibility. This naivety was to cost the Freemen dear when the terms of the amending Act were eventually agreed. The Master Manufacturers were also greatly aided in their campaign to convert the Freemen to their cause by their ability to use language that the Freemen could understand and that flattered them as men who had bravely struggled against overwhelming odds. The Address, which is littered with references to battles and struggles, to perseverance and endurance, is couched in poetic, almost biblical, language and was probably written by Robert Barnard, known locally as the 'Poet-Laureate of Sheffield'.⁴⁵² The Master Manufacturers concluded their Address with an appeal for funds:

O then ye old Men, embrace the precious Opportunity, and remember that every Penny you bestow will be valued more than a Pound in the Estimation of your Posterity! Ye of middle Age, who have been active in blowing Coals, now when the Iron is hot, how can you stand like Children and neglect the welding Heat! And ye in the Prime of Youth, whose Labour produces you Plenty, how can you place Money in a better Bank than where it will provide Comfort for your old Age?

⁴⁵² Glassby, *Sheffield Miscellany*, p. 107.

The extent to which the Freemen were persuaded by the Committee of Master Manufacturers' 'terms of accommodation' was revealed on December 1st 1790 when they published details of the petition that they were going to present to the House of Commons. The Freemen now proposed that just three amendments should be made to the Act of Incorporation: that all Freemen, whether masters or journeymen, should have the right to take apprentices; that a court comprising at least one Member of the Company together with a jury of twelve Freemen, who were also householders, should be established to try any case concerning the rules and regulations of the Company; and that any Freeman who had carried on business in his own name for twelve months should be deemed to be a master manufacturer and that all master manufacturers should have the right to elect the Members of the Company.⁴⁵³ Less than two years earlier, the Freemen had been demanding that ALL Freemen should have the right to nominate those who served on the Company, now they were proposing that this right should be restricted to probably no more than five hundred of their number.⁴⁵⁴ And whilst the 1789 proposal for a cutler's court had been retained, membership of the jury was now to be restricted to a select few. Only the proposal that journeymen should be allowed to take apprentices was

⁴⁵³ CCA, S5/3. This document was signed by James Higginbottom, who was also named as the appellant in the case the Freemen had brought before Chancery. Unfortunately, very little is known about Higginbottom apart from the fact that he was a journeyman-Freeman, like Arthur Jewitt, who had been granted his Freedom in 1776. However the fact that he was acting as a named spokesman for the Freemen suggests that he held a senior position on their committee.

⁴⁵⁴ See chapter four.

unchanged - and this was something that, in 1785, the Freeman had opposed until persuaded otherwise by Trickett.⁴⁵⁵

In 1785, the Freeman had chosen a committee of their economic and social peers to act as their spokesmen in their campaign to persuade the Cutlers' Company to enforce its existing rules and regulations and to re-establish what they believed to be the *status quo*, a time when, in the communal folk memory, every cutler had had the opportunity to become a master manufacturer. Later, frustrated at the lack of progress in their campaign, the Freeman had chosen a charismatic, and radical, master manufacturer to be their leader and had come to believe that the solution to their problems lay in the restitution of their right to choose the officers of the Company. Now, the Freeman's Committee had been persuaded by other master manufacturers that this right should be restricted to those who were already successful, that control of the Cutlers' Company should remain in the hands of clique – albeit a slightly larger one. The majority of the cutlers at large – the 'little mesters' and journeymen – appear to have trusted this new Committee of Master Manufacturers, possibly because it included John Jervis, who had supported them from the early days of their campaign, and Robert Barnard who was also able to persuade Arthur Jewitt to rejoin the fray and once again to act as one of the Freeman's spokesmen.⁴⁵⁶ The majority of the Freeman still believed – as, no doubt, did Jervis, Barnard and many other

⁴⁵⁵ See chapter two.

⁴⁵⁶ Jewitt, 'Passages', p. 44.

master manufacturers – that the way to solve the problems that beset the cutlery trades and to ensure that opportunities were available for all cutlers was to reform the Cutlers’ Company from within. The Company was unlikely to ever accept a proposal that allowed ALL Freemen to have a voice in the election of its officers, but they might accept that those who were master manufacturers should have that right.

With the benefit of hindsight, and from a twenty-first century perspective, the Freemen’s trust and naivety is incomprehensible. But the cutlery trades – and indeed the town as a whole - were experiencing seismic changes that many people were finding unsettling. In such circumstances it was natural for them to support proposals that *appeared* to offer a positive, and immediate, solution to their problems. It should also be remembered that many Freemen would have been deeply shocked, and probably intimidated, by the outcome of the scissorgrinders’ strike. The spectacle of five of the strike’s leaders being marched, in chains, through the town and onto the long road to Wakefield would have provided a potent reminder to everyone both of the power of the town’s leading citizens and employers and also of the potential fate that could befall anyone who opposed them.

The final stages of the campaign to amend the Act of Incorporation

On December 1st 1790, both the Freeman's and the Company's petitions to amend the Act of Incorporation were presented to the House of Commons. Both were referred to the same Select Committee.⁴⁵⁷ William Wilberforce and Henry Duncombe, the M.P.s for the county of Yorkshire, were chosen to be members of this committee.⁴⁵⁸ On December 4th, Wilberforce wrote to the Master Cutler (and probably also to the Freeman's Committee, though this letter has not survived) urging him to send representatives to London to act on the Company's behalf.⁴⁵⁹ On December 15th, Wilberforce and Duncombe suggested that one of their clerks, Mr. Barwell, should act for the Company and that another, Mr. White, should act for the Freeman and that the two should nominate three disinterested parties to listen to the arguments of all concerned and then draw up a joint Bill which Wilberforce and Duncombe would then present to the House.⁴⁶⁰

The parties accepted the suggestion. The Freeman sent Arthur Jewitt and William Knutton, a journeyman cutler, to London to act on their behalf. The Company sent the two Wardens, George Wood and John Henfrey. Interestingly the Committee of Master Manufacturers also sent a representative, Robert

⁴⁵⁷ *J.H.C.*, December 1st 1790.

⁴⁵⁸ Henry Duncombe (1728-1818) was the third son of Thomas Duncombe of Duncombe Park, Yorkshire. He was a founder member of Wyvill's Association.

⁴⁵⁹ Sheffield Archives, TC352-4; CCA, C9/2. Company minute book, December 6th 1790.

⁴⁶⁰ Unfortunately, the names of the three neutral intermediaries were not recorded.

Barnard. It is not clear if the Master Manufacturers had been invited to participate in the negotiations because they were perceived to be moderates, respected by both sides, who would act as intermediaries between the Freeman and the Company, or if Robert Barnard was, in fact, one of the three supposedly neutral parties. The former would seem the most likely.

The negotiations did not start well. The Company's representatives were probably two of the most disliked cutlery manufacturers in Sheffield. Both had played a prominent role in defeating the scissor-grinders' strike and, as was discussed earlier, Wood was a notorious abuser of the Company's rules and regulations. They were unlikely to have been men whom the Freeman trusted. Henfrey and Wood appear to have been equally suspicious of the Freeman – on December 15th 1790, for example, Wood wrote to the Company asking for information about the number of people who had attended a recent Freeman's meeting because he believed that Jewitt and Knutton were exaggerating the level of their support. In this letter, Wood also imparted the alarming news that the Freeman's representatives had been instructed by their Committee to apply to Parliament for the repeal of the entire Incorporating Act if their demands were not met and that he, Wood, had been informed by Wilberforce and Duncombe that this request would probably be granted as the House 'are always ready to take off all restraints upon trade'.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁶¹ George Wood to the Master Cutler 15th December 1790, Sheffield Archives TC352-6. Wood said that the Freeman's letter had been signed by James Higginbottom .

However, despite the many disagreements, the parties continued to hold meetings throughout January and February 1791, often in Wilberforce's London home. Finally, on February 24th, they reached, and signed, an agreement and on March 7th 1791, Wilberforce, as promised, presented a Bill 'for the better Regulation and Government of the Company of Cutlers' to the House of Commons where it was ordered to be read for a second time.⁴⁶² Unfortunately, on that same day the Master Manufacturers and Freemen jointly accused the Cutlers' Company of renegeing on the agreement.⁴⁶³

The parties had agreed that all of the costs that had been incurred in obtaining the amending Act – the Freemen's, master manufacturers' and Company's - would be paid from the Company's funds and that these funds were to be boosted through a levy of 2s 6d on every Freemen. However, some of the Company Members in Sheffield objected to this, arguing that the majority of Freemen would refuse to pay the levy and that the Company should not be liable for the debts of the Freemen's Committee. The Master Manufacturers and the Freemen accused them of trying 'to undo what their Agents have accomplished' and they urged the Freemen to prove the Members wrong by signing the documents that were in the office of Michael Burton and the house of Luke Wilde 'to testify their Acquiescence in such a meritorious Tax':

⁴⁶² Sheffield Local Studies Library, MP419S; *J.H.C.*, March 7th 1791.

⁴⁶³ Sheffield Local Studies Library, MP419S.

Hasten then ye Friends of Peace: Hasten all who prefer Harmony and Fellowship to the Voice of Discord: Let not any Man delay; but let us use all Diligence to complete, by every laudable Means, so desirable an Issue. Peace, however purchased, is, in comparison of our long Dissensions, a Consummation devoutly to be wished.⁴⁶⁴

On March 11th, Robert Barnard and John Jervis published an advertisement in the *Register* informing all of the paper's readers that they were 'astonished at the Duplicity and confounded by the crooked and illiberal Policy' that had been adopted by the Company and they called a meeting of the master manufacturers to discuss what they should do next.⁴⁶⁵ The following week, 'Ille Ego' wrote to the *Register* claiming that the Company was jeopardising the settlement by refusing to pay the expenses that had been incurred by men who, for many years, had been 'a thorn in the side of the corporate officers'.⁴⁶⁶ But why, he asked, should the few who had invested so much for the good of the many be the only ones to suffer financially? All of those who would benefit from the

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.* Luke Wilde was a Freeman pen-knife cutler and a member of the Freeman's committee.

⁴⁶⁵ *Sheffield Register*, March 11th 1791.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, March 18th 1791. Unfortunately, I have not been able to ascertain the identity of 'Ille Ego' but his choice of pseudonym (loosely translated as *I am he*) suggests that he, like 'A Freeman by Servitude', was familiar with Virgil's *Aeneid*. He ended his letter with the comment that although 'the Writer of these observations is too insignificant for his name to interest the public: yet he wishes not to take advantage of obscurity, and his address is left with the Printer; that so every Applicant who may wish to decline a public discussion, may know where to find a private Respondent'.

new Act should be liable for its cost. Moreover, he asked what sacrifices the Company Members had made when the Freemen had made so many – ‘They have receded from many claims, which however well founded, have been offered up on the altar of Peace’. Echoing the feelings of many within the town, he described the Freemen’s campaign as a ‘political struggle’ and warned his fellow townsmen to be careful ‘how we dare to repress the first dawning of SPIRIT among us’.

On March 26th 1791, following a meeting with the gentlemen, merchants and manufacturers of the town, the Cutlers’ Company succumbed to public pressure and signed a memorandum ratifying the agreement that had been made on their behalf by their representatives in London.⁴⁶⁷ Two days later, the Bill to amend the Act of Incorporation received its second reading in the House of Commons and was referred back to Wilberforce’s committee.⁴⁶⁸

The Act of 1791

Throughout April and May 1791, representatives of the Company, the Freemen and the Master Manufacturers made regular trips to London to meet with Wilberforce and his committee to fine-tune the Bill.⁴⁶⁹ Finally, on May 31st,

⁴⁶⁷ NA/KB1/27/5.

⁴⁶⁸ *J.H.C.*, March 28th 1791.

⁴⁶⁹ NA/KB1/27/5; Sheffield Archives TC352/8; CCA, D1/2 the accounts of Joseph Ward; CCA, D22/1.

Wilberforce presented it to the House of Commons. Two days later, it was passed to the Lords and on June 10th 1791, it was given Royal Assent.⁴⁷⁰ The news was greeted with jubilation in Sheffield. Gales reported ‘that a seven-years litigation is at length happily ended’ and on June 24th, the day that the Act came into force, the committees of the Freemen and of the Master Manufacturers jointly hosted a subscription dinner at which ‘all was unanimity and joy’.⁴⁷¹ Both they and the Cutler’s Company voted to send letters of thanks to the Duke of Norfolk and his agent, Vincent Eyre, for the help that they had given in enabling the parties to reach an amicable consensus.⁴⁷² The Company also presented both Wilberforce and Duncombe with a case of knives each.⁴⁷³

The Act of 1791 (31 George III cap. 58) repealed all of the Incorporating Act apart from the clauses relating to the reasons for establishing the Company, its continued existence, the role of the Master, Wardens, etc., and their power to make bye-laws – although, from henceforth, all byelaws were to be made public before they were enacted.⁴⁷⁴ The Company would no longer be a self-elected oligarchy but would include men nominated by the master manufacturers – the master manufacturers were to meet annually, on the first Monday in August,

⁴⁷⁰ *Sheffield Register*, May 27th 1791; *J.H.C.*, May 31st, June 2nd, June 8th and June 10th 1791.

⁴⁷¹ *Sheffield Register*, June 3rd, June 17th and July 1st 1791.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, July 1st 1791; CCA, C9/2, Company minute book, June 13th 1791. These letters of thanks suggest that Vincent Eyre, or possibly even the Duke of Norfolk himself, may have been one of the three neutral parties.

⁴⁷³ CCA, D1/2, the accounts of George Wood.

⁴⁷⁴ CCA, B1/2/1, 31 George III cap. 58. For a full list of all of the clauses of the Act, see Leader, *History*, vol. 2, pp. 13-14.

when, providing at least forty attended the meeting, they were to nominate twenty-four of their number from whom the retiring Company were to choose twelve of the following year's Assistants. Whilst this was a victory, of sorts, for those master manufacturers who felt that they had previously been excluded from the clique who controlled the Company, the situation for the majority of Freemen and journeymen remained unchanged – they would still have no voice in choosing those by whom they were governed and, therefore, no ability to sanction them. Anyone who refused to take office once elected was to be fined £30 and any officer who failed to attend meetings or in any other way neglected his duty was to be fined £10 for each offence – prohibitively high fines for all but the wealthiest master manufacturers.

The principal concerns of the majority of the journeymen and Freemen had always been apprenticeships, marks and the employment of 'foreigners'. The Act re-confirmed the rule that only Freemen could take apprentices, but it removed the original stipulation that Freemen had to be 'owners of their work' (i.e. able to trade independently). However, from henceforth, all apprentices would have to take out their Freedom and be granted a mark BEFORE they could work as journeymen. The charge for taking out a Freedom and mark remained unchanged at 8s 2d.⁴⁷⁵ Freemen would not be allowed to take a second apprentice until their first had served for three years, though they could

⁴⁷⁵ Freemen also had to pay stamp duty and a nominal fee, usually 2d. to the Beadle.

continue to take as many of their own sons or the sons of other Freemen as they wanted and, crucially, parish apprentices would not be counted. However, they could be exempted from this time limit by paying a fine of £5 – a sum that, obviously, limited the option to the more economically successful. In an attempt to solve the problem of the journeymen whose indentures had never been recorded in the Company's books, the Act gave these men a time-limited amnesty to come forward and claim their Freedom.

On the subject of marks, anyone found guilty of striking the mark of another man, or one similar to that of another man, would be liable to a fine of £20, half of which was to be given to the man whose mark had been counterfeited. This minor victory for the Freemen was counterbalanced by the fact that henceforth men would be allowed to work in more than one branch of the trades providing that they had a different mark for each branch – the old rule of one man/one craft/one mark had gone.

And in yet another blow for the Freemen, foreigners were to be allowed to buy their Freedom. Anyone who had not served an apprenticeship but who had worked in the trades, either independently or as a partner, for at least seven years would be entitled to his Freedom and a mark on payment of treble the normal fees. Those who had not been working in the trades for seven years would be allowed to become Freemen on payment of a fee of £20. Only those deemed to be master manufacturers would be allowed to employ 'foreigners'.

providing that the ‘foreigners’ were working on a new invention or on something that would improve the trade and that the master manufacturer had obtained a licence (for a fee) from the Company.⁴⁷⁶

Nor were the Freemen successful in their desire to have a Cutlers’ Court established. Instead, the Company’s proposal was enshrined in law – the Master Cutler and Members would continue to hear cases but the local Justices of the Peace would, in future, have the power to recover fines and imprison offenders. All parties were to be allowed the right of appeal to Quarter Sessions. Any fines were to be used, as theoretically they were before, to help poor cutlers. The Freemen were, however, successful in obtaining greater transparency with regard to the Company’s accounts – the retiring Master Cutler was to make a full account of all monies received and paid by him and an abstract was to be published and made available to all Freemen.

Finally, the Act stated that the expenses incurred by all parties should be examined by five named arbitrators and, if approved, paid from the Company’s funds. In order to boost these funds, a levy of 2s 6d was to be paid, within six months, by every man who was already Freeman and by all new Freemen until all of the expenses had been paid. The penalty for non-payment of this levy was to be ten shillings.

⁴⁷⁶ Only thirteen of these licences appear to have been granted: three in 1791, eight in 1792, one in 1794 and one in 1795. CCA, C21/1.

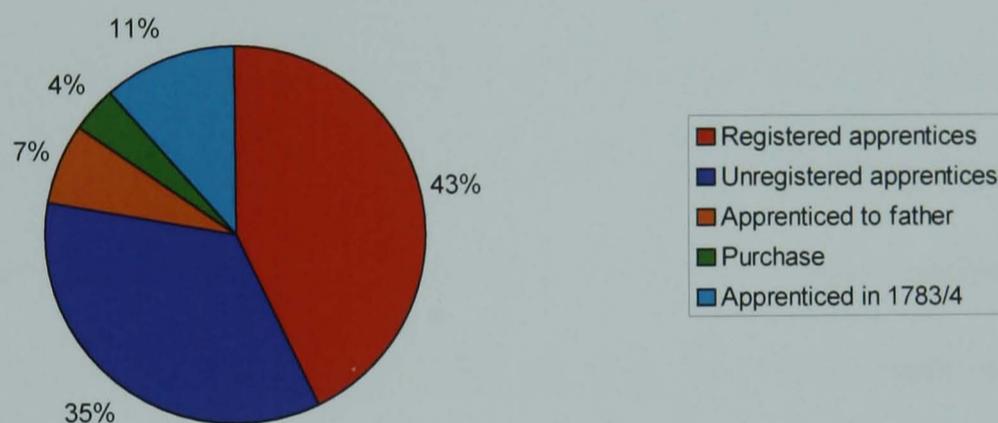
The implementation of the amended Act

The most immediate and obvious effect of the new Act was a rush of new Freemen. Between 1785 and 1790, there had been approximately sixty-seven new Freemen each year. In the first six months of 1791, there were thirty-four, but between June 24th (the date that the Act came into force) and December 31st, there were a staggering 1,389.⁴⁷⁷ Of these, 159 had been apprenticed in 1783 or 1784 and so would reasonably have been expected to have become Free around 1791. Fifty-four were men who had taken advantage of the clauses in the new Act which allowed them to buy their Freedom – they included seven knife-handle makers, three knife embellishers and John Hounsfeld who described himself as a knifemaker and who was to be the Master Cutler in 1819. Ninety-four were men who had been trained by their Freemen fathers and who, therefore, did not have formal indentures. Of the remaining 1,082, 489 had not had their indentures enrolled at the Cutlers' Hall – they were illegal apprentices who, previously, would never have been allowed to become Freemen but who were now able to take advantage of the amnesty offered by the Act. Some of them would have been apprenticed to masters who had exceeded their legal quota and who had not registered the indentures in case the Company had been alerted to a breach of its regulations: others would have been parish apprentices who had not been registered because their master had wanted to be able to take another apprentice of his choice and again had not wanted to alert the Company; others would have been apprenticed to

⁴⁷⁷ CCA, Freedom Books.

journeymen; and some may have been apprenticed to men who did not know or, more likely, did not care about the rules of the Company. The presence of so many of these ‘illegals’ in the workforce is indicative of how far the old system had broken down and how reluctant, or incapable, the Cutlers’ Company had been to enforce its regulations.

*Figure 16: **Background of the 1,389 men who became Free between June and December 1791***



(Source: The Freedom and Indenture Books of the Cutlers’ Company)

The remaining 593 new Freemen had had their indentures enrolled at the Cutlers’ Hall – some more than thirty years earlier.

Figure 17: Year of apprenticeship of men who became Free between June and December 1791



(Source: The Freedom Books of the Cutlers' Company)

Why did these men, all of whom had been working as journeymen (some, as can be seen from the graph above, for very many years), decided to become Freemen? The immediate answer is that they had to do if they wanted to continue working in the cutlery trades – the Act stated that no-one could work as a journeyman unless he had first taken out his Freedom and been granted a mark. However, an examination of the marks that they took out suggests that most of them had no immediate ambitions to market their cutlery independently. As has been discussed earlier, marks were used not only to identify makers but often as means of identification for the man himself. Traditionally, they had been comprised of symbols many of which were specific to families – for example one man might have the symbol of a heart, his son a heart with a diamond below, his grandson a heart with a diamond above and below, etc. During the eighteenth century, as literacy increased, words became popular, especially place names like PARIS, SIAM, BENGAL and numerous variations of LONDON - LONDON BRIDGE, LONDON

CITY, IN LONDON for example. Family names were often used until 1773 when they were prohibited. Classical words were also popular – JUPITER, VENUS, ATLAS, etc – as were puns – BY OF ME, Y SIR, SHAVEWEL. BEAR IN MIND, etc. The important thing was that the mark was memorable. The thirty-four men who became Free in the first six months of 1791 took traditional marks; the majority of the 1,389 who became Free between June 24th and December 31st, took the next in a sequence of numbers that had begun with the number ‘91’. To these men, their marks were not particularly important because, as journeymen, they would be making cutlery that would be stamped with someone else’s mark.

For centuries Freedom had been the goal of everyone who entered the cutlery trades. It brought with it a certain social status, the right to market one’s own goods and, more importantly, the right to take an apprentice. With an extra pair of hands in the workshop, a ‘little mester’ could take on more work and thereby increase his earning capacity and, hopefully, start on the road to becoming a master manufacturer. Unfortunately, because of the numbers of records involved, it has not been possible to analyse how many of the new Freemen took an apprentice. But there was a significant increase in the numbers of apprentices who had their indentures enrolled at the Cutlers’ Hall – between 1788 and 1790 there were 533 enrolments, and between 1791 and 1793 there were 1,075. Whilst some of these will have been boys whose indentures were

being enrolled retrospectively, it would be reasonable to assume that many would have been apprenticed to the new Freemen.

For the Cutlers' Company, the most immediate effect of the new Act was a sudden and dramatic increase in its funds. The new Freemen had each to pay 8s 2d for their Freedom and mark and it cost 11s 8d to bind an apprentice. When Joseph Ward had become the Master Cutler in August 1790, there was just under £193 in the Company's funds; when he completed his term of office there was £281 and by August 1792, there was £686.⁴⁷⁸ The Act, however, had stated that all of the expenses that had been incurred in obtaining it and also those that had been sustained by all of the interested parties during the previous two sessions of Parliament should be paid out of the Company's funds. It had also stated that these funds were to be boosted by a levy of 2s 6d on all Freemen and it named five arbitrators who were to be responsible for collecting the money, examining claims and, where appropriate, paying them. The decision of the arbitrators 'or any Three or more of them' was to 'be final and conclusive'.⁴⁷⁹ The arbitrators were George Wood, Joseph Bailey and William Dunn who were all Members of the Company, and Robert Barnard and John Jervis who were members of the Master Manufacturers' Committee. Why the Freemen were not represented or why someone who had had no involvement in the dispute was

⁴⁷⁸ CCA, D1/2, the accounts of Joseph Ward and of George Wood.

⁴⁷⁹ CCA, B1/2/1, 31 George III cap. 58.

not named as a neutral fifth arbitrator is not known but the fact that the Company had a built-in majority caused problems from the start.

The arbitrators held their first meeting on July 1st 1791 when sixty-six men paid their due; by January 20th 1792, 2,374 had paid and by July 26th 1792, 2,820 - giving the arbitrators a balance of £352 10s.⁴⁸⁰ Money continued to be received, irregularly, until 1814. The first payment was also made on July 1st 1791: £8 5s to John Jervis. But when the Freemen presented their expenses, the three Members of the Company refused to sanction their payment. In fact, George Wood reputedly said that he 'positively refused to pay the same or any part thereof and declared that they [the Company] should or would not pay one Farthing thereof'.⁴⁸¹ The deadlock continued for over a year when, in desperation, Jervis and Barnard took the case to the Court of King's Bench.

The case came before the court in November 1792. Arthur Jewitt, William Knutton and Luke Wild were called to give evidence on behalf of the Freemen. They told the court that a memorandum had been signed by representatives of the Freemen, the Company and the Master Manufacturers in February 1791 agreeing that all of the expenses that had been incurred in obtaining the Act and those that had been incurred by the Freemen in the two previous Parliamentary sessions should be paid out of the Company's funds. This agreement had

⁴⁸⁰ *Sheffield Register*, June 24th 1791; CCA, L1/12.

⁴⁸¹ NA/KB1/27/5.

subsequently been enshrined in the Act, but because of the actions of George Wood, Joseph Bailey and William Dun the Freeman and the master manufacturers were still owed in excess of £500.⁴⁸² George Wood, John Henfrey and Joseph Ward, on the behalf of the Company, told the court that they did not believe that anyone understood the agreement to mean that the Company was liable for all of the expenses. The court disagreed and the case was sent for trial at York Assizes in March 1793. The Company lost and were ordered to pay the Freeman and master manufacturers £300 plus their legal expenses of £172 10s.⁴⁸³ The arbitrators continued to make payments until August 14th 1814 when a final payment of £18 10s was paid to Luke Wilde.⁴⁸⁴

The nomination of the Company's Assistants

As was noted above, the Act of 1791 stated that, each year, the master manufacturers were to meet on the first Monday in August and, if the meeting was attended by at least forty of them, they could nominate twenty-four of their number from whom the Company would choose twelve to act as Assistants. The first meeting, on August 1st 1791, was attended by over fifty-five master manufacturers who duly nominated twenty-four of their number including Robert Barnard, John Jervis, Thomas Greaves and Enoch Trickett's brother.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*

⁴⁸³ CCA, C9/2. Company minute book, March 16th 1793; CCA, D1/2. the accounts of John Henfrey.

⁴⁸⁴ CCA, D22/1.

James, all of whom had played an active role in the campaign. Enoch Trickett attended the meeting but was not nominated, perhaps because the master manufacturers knew that he would never be chosen to be a Member of the Company, either because he was too closely linked with the Freemen or because he was perceived to be too much of a radical. When the Company announced the twelve that they had chosen to be Assistants, the only activist on the list was Robert Barnard.⁴⁸⁵

The following year, Enoch Trickett was nominated along with John Jervis, Thomas Greaves and another activist, William Wild.⁴⁸⁶ But, when the Company met to choose the Members they claimed that the master manufacturers had not agreed upon a list of nominees and so they decided that they would choose the Officers in the old way – they did, however re-select all of those who had been chosen from the previous year’s list of nominees except for Robert Barnard.⁴⁸⁷

In the view of the fact that he was supporting the Freemen’s demands to have their expenses paid and that he was about to take the Company to the Court of King’s Bench, this is hardly surprising. What is surprising, however, is the Company’s claim that the master manufacturers had not agreed upon a list of nominees when the list had, in fact, been published in the *Sheffield Register* two

⁴⁸⁵ The twelve chosen by the Company from the list of nominees were Robert Barnard, Thomas Slagg, Thomas Harrison, Joseph Hutton, Richard Spurr, Samuel Stanley, Daniel Brammall, William Urton, George Hall, Thomas Hoyland, Samuel Fowler, and Joseph Creswicke. CCA, C9/2. Company minutes, August 12th and 18th 1791.

⁴⁸⁶ *Sheffield Register*. August 10th 1792.

⁴⁸⁷ CCA, C9/2, Company minute book, August 23rd 1792.

weeks earlier. Although there is no evidence to support the theory, it is probable that this was a deliberate act of defiance orchestrated by George Wood, the retiring Master Cutler, and John Henfrey, his successor, neither of whom were sympathetic to, or popular with, the Freemen or the more radical master manufacturers. However, the fact that this action does not appear to have elicited howls of protest from either the master manufacturers or the Freemen suggests that they had become disillusioned with the Company and their ability or willingness to address the problems of the cutlery trades. As will be shown in the following chapter, many of them had found another focus for their energies.

The Company accepted the master manufacturers' list of nominees in 1793 and chose twelve Assistants from it. But thereafter, at least according to the Company minutes, the meeting of master manufacturers did not reach quorum and no more lists were submitted.⁴⁸⁸ Whether this is true or whether the Cutlers' Company simply chose to ignore the lists until the master manufacturers eventually stopped submitting them is not known. As will be discussed below, despite the initial euphoria, the Act of 1791 had severely undermined the power of the Company and the majority of master manufacturers may have decided that it did not have a role to play in the modern economic environment and that membership was no longer of commercial or social benefit.

⁴⁸⁸ As prescribed by the Act, a notice calling the master manufacturers to a meeting was placed in the local newspaper every year until 1994. In most years, no-one attended.

Aftermath

As was noted above, the news that the seven-year dispute had been resolved and that a new amending Act had been passed was greeted with 'unanimity and joy' in Sheffield.⁴⁸⁹ But, in reality, very few people benefited from its passing and, in fact, it merely prolonged the slow and inevitable decline of the Cutlers' Company's role as a regulatory body.

The biggest losers were the ordinary Freemen and it is ironic that it was their brave and, in many ways, revolutionary decision to unite against the Company in 1784 that had set in motion a chain of events that, once started, had led to this most unintended outcome. They had wanted the Company to reinforce its protectionist policies but instead the floodgates to free market opportunism had been well and truly opened. 'Foreigners' could now not only work in the trades but they could buy their Freedom. Freemen could buy the right to take as many apprentices as they wanted. Journeymen (all of whom now had to be Freemen) and 'little mesters' continued to face competition in the labour market from an over abundance of apprentices and their chances of achieving independent master status were even more remote in the face of competition from existing masters and from the influx of wealthy foreigners, both of whom were now operating in a much less regulated market. The long-cherished rule of one man/one craft/one mark had been abandoned and whilst this meant that the Freemen were able to diversify, it also, inevitably, meant a diminution in craft

⁴⁸⁹ *Sheffield Register*, June 24th 1791.

pride and solidarity. And the majority still did not have the right to choose those by whom they were governed.

Most Freemen continued to operate as semi-independent wage labourers working for whichever master manufacturer sub-contracted to them. Many remained trapped in a cycle of debt and dependency. In August 1792, Joseph Gales claimed that ‘there is scarcely a Journeyman Cutler who is not from £5 to £30 in debt to his master and, if he changed master, the debt was passed on at a higher rate of interest’.⁴⁹⁰ One journeyman wrote to the *Sheffield Register* asking how he was expected to support his family and educate his children when half of his average annual income of £31 4s went on rent, tax, coal, etc. leaving only £15 8s 8d for food, clothes, tools, materials, medicines, etc.⁴⁹¹ These were the type of men for whom the ideals espoused by Thomas Paine and his supporters had so much appeal.

There was also disappointment and disillusionment amongst the master manufacturers who, in 1790, had believed that a reformed Cutlers’ Company would still have a role to play in the local cutlery trades but that it would be better managed if a measure of democracy was introduced allowing them to participate in its governance. Although, in theory, this had been legislated for in the Act, in practice, because there were only ever twelve master manufacturer

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, August 31st 1792.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, August 17th 1792.

nominees on the Company, the old clique were able to ensure that they and their supporters remained in the majority. The nomination system was soon abandoned and the master manufacturers, who had once supported the continued existence of the Company, increasingly came round to the view of those who regarded it not only as hindrance to economic growth but as an anachronism in the modern commercial world.

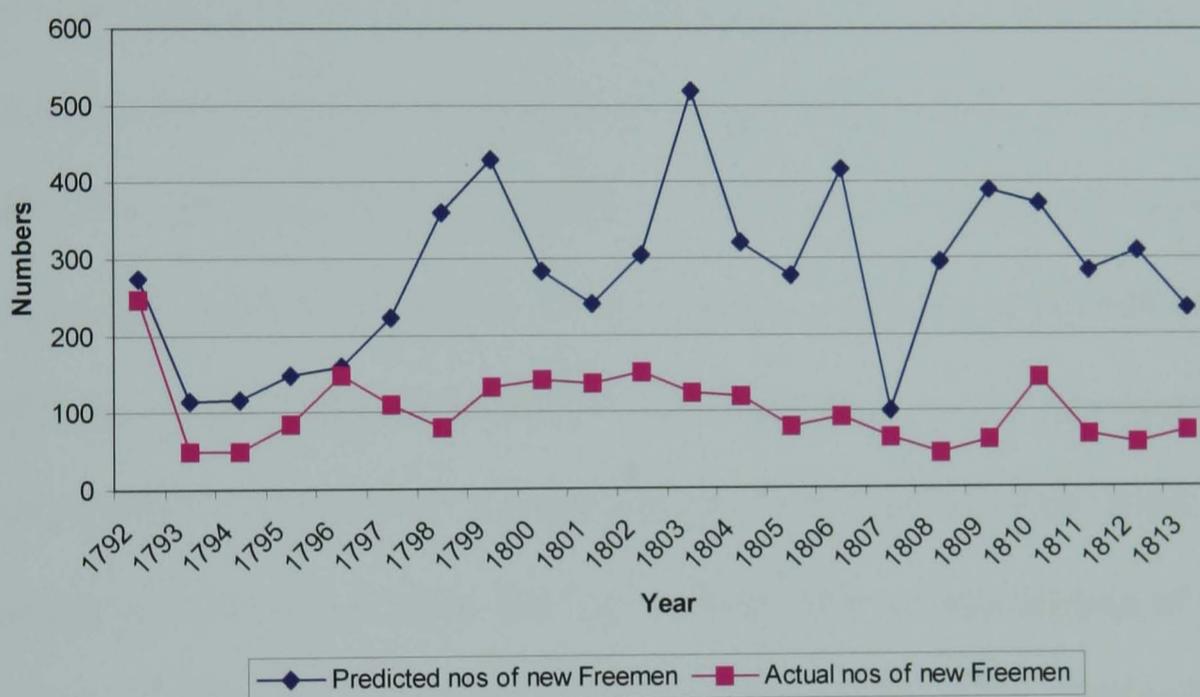
The master manufacturers who had advocated the removal of all restrictions on trade and, by default, the dissolution of the Cutlers' Company were frustrated that, though weakened, the Company continued to exist and to exert some control over the cutlery trades and, as a result, over the economy of the town as a whole. A correspondent to the *Sheffield Register* in September 1792 even suggested that there should be an application to Parliament to repeal the 1791 Act in order to allow trade to flourish completely unshackled.⁴⁹²

As for the Company itself, the Act had critically undermined its very foundations and the cracks that had begun to appear in its control of the trades well before 1791 soon became chasms. This is most clearly indicated in the decline in the number of men who took out their Freedom. As will be remembered, the Act had stated that when an apprentice had served his time, he had to take out his Freedom before he could work as a journeyman. Between 1785 and 1806, the number of apprentices averaged around 280 each year. If

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, September 7th 1792.

they were all obeying the law, and allowing for boys who did not complete their apprenticeship, one would expect to see an average of about 250 new Freemen in each year between 1792 and 1813. But, as the graph below indicates, this did not happen.

Figure 18: **Graph showing the predicted and actual numbers of new Freemen, 1792-1813**



(Source: the Indenture and Freedom Books of the Cutlers' Company)

As it is unlikely that few, if any, of these missing journeymen would have gone to work as cutlers in other towns (Sheffield was the centre of the nation's cutlery industry), the inevitable conclusion is that each year an average of about 170 men were starting to work as journeymen in direct contravention of the Act – and the Company did nothing about it. They seem to have had neither the ability nor, more importantly, the will to stand against the march of free trade. Matters were further exacerbated by the appointment, in January 1792, of John

Rimington as their clerk – a man who, throughout the thirty years of his tenure, showed very little interest in the Company's affairs and who oversaw the biggest decline in its entire history.⁴⁹³

The Company quickly abrogated all responsibility for the trades and for the interests of the majority of cutlers: in 1797, for example, when the forkmakers petitioned them to issue a byelaw prohibiting the sale of cutlery made from cast metal (a practice that the Company had, in fact, prohibited by a bye-law in 1780), they refused to become involved.⁴⁹⁴ Instead the Members concentrated on ensuring that they, as officers of the Cutlers' Company, maintained their traditional superior status in Sheffield's social hierarchy and on spending the cash windfall that the 1791 Act had brought. Vast amounts were spent on feasting: in 1790 Joseph Ward had been allowed £86 towards the cost of the Cutlers' and Christmas feasts, in 1792 John Henfrey was given £200 and by 1803, the allowance had risen to £245.⁴⁹⁵ Donations to the poor, however, remained virtually unchanged.

The inexorable decline of the Cutlers' Company as a regulatory body was further hastened in 1801 when a group of master manufacturers, with the tacit

⁴⁹³ John Rimington was a lawyer and the son of a Yorkshire gentleman.

⁴⁹⁴ CCA, C9/2, Company minute book, November 1st 1797. See also chapter three.

⁴⁹⁵ CCA, D1/2, the accounts of Joseph Ward, John Henfrey and James Makin. The Company's finances were also boosted by high returns on its shares in the River Dun Navigation Company – Sidney Pollard, 'Early Economic Ventures of the Company', in Binfield and Hey, *Mesters to Masters*, pp. 58-59.

support of the Company, successfully petitioned Parliament for a number of amendments to be made to the 1791 Act – principally that Freemen should be allowed to bequeath their marks to their widows who would then have the right to sell or bequeath them as they chose.⁴⁹⁶ Previously, on the death of a Freeman, his mark had reverted to the Cutlers' Company who could re-grant it to whosoever they wished.

The final death knell, however, was sounded in 1814 when a group of master manufacturers petitioned Parliament for the repeal of all Acts relating to the Cutlers' Company.⁴⁹⁷ A deputation of Freemen appealed to the Company to oppose the Bill which, they said, would be detrimental to Freemen, journeymen and apprentices, and to the finances of the Company.⁴⁹⁸ The Company, however, knew that repeal was inevitable and declined to become involved.⁴⁹⁹ Consequently, twenty-three years to the day after the passing of the hard won Act of 1791, another Act (54 George III cap. 119) repealed all of the clauses relating to apprenticeships and stated that, henceforth, 'any person may carry on or work in the incorporated trades though not a freeman, and may have as many apprentices as he likes, for such term as he thinks proper'. Anybody, whether a Freeman or not, was now entitled to a mark and mark rent was abolished.⁵⁰⁰

The cutlery trades in Hallamshire were now truly free.

⁴⁹⁶ CCA, B1/3.

⁴⁹⁷ CCA, C9/3, Company minute book, April 13th 1814.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, April 30th and May 18th 1814.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, May 26th and 27th 1814.

⁵⁰⁰ CCA, B4/3.

Conclusion

On the day that the longed fought for Act came into force, Joseph Gales had opened his editorial with the comment,

On this day takes effect the lately obtained act for the better regulation of our Corporation of Cutlers. May it prove a means of widely extending the commerce of this place and above all – of quieting the minds of all its members, and restoring tranquillity to a long-divided body of people.⁵⁰¹

It was to prove a forlorn hope. The seven-year dispute had accentuated divisions within the local society and encouraged the development of a sense of socio-economic class-consciousness. More seriously, it left a long-term legacy of bitterness and suspicion that had been further compounded by the feelings of disillusionment and betrayal felt by many when they realised that their situation under the new Act was no better, and in some cases was in fact worse, than it had been under the old Act. In mid-July 1791, the news that Hallam moor was to be enclosed proved to be the spark that lit this tinder box and a serious riot broke out which will be discussed in the following chapter.

In the long term, the principal beneficiaries of the new Act were, undoubtedly, the master manufacturers who were able to take advantage of the loosening of ‘the Cramps and Fetters’ that had previously bound the cutlery trades to fulfil

⁵⁰¹ *Sheffield Register*, June 24th 1791.

their trade ambitions.⁵⁰² These master manufacturers included both men who had supported the Cutlers' Company (including those who were, or were to be, Members of the Company) and those who had ostensibly supported the Freeman. Within a very short time, the combination of the economic strength of these men and the apathy of the Cutlers' Company demolished the remaining protectionist walls surrounding the cutlery trades. The Cutlers' Company itself became little more than a glorified dining club and in 1815 they resolved to abandon their monthly business meetings.⁵⁰³

The Freeman, on the other hand – the 'little mesters' and journeymen – were the losers. They had been persuaded to agree to what would be for them an unfavourable compromise partly because of their economic naivety but also because they, like many others, wanted the acrimonious and divisive dispute to be ended and the trades, and the town, to be returned to normality. They had also been cowed by the defeat of the scissorgrinders, a defeat that may have encouraged some masters to use the threat of economic repercussions to bring the men whom they employed into line. But the Freeman had also learnt some valuable lessons, principally how to work together and how to organise themselves through committees. They had learnt a great deal about political theory, particularly about the concepts of rights and liberties and notably the right of the governed both to choose and to sanction those by whom they were governed. Their disillusionment at the outcome of the dispute coincided with a

⁵⁰² These words were used by the Cutlers' Company in a notice published in the *Sheffield Register* on January 3rd 1789. See chapter three.

⁵⁰³ CCA, C9/3, Company minute book, February 24th 1815. A few months earlier, they had even discussed selling the Cutlers' Hall. *Ibid.*, September 30th 1814.

nationwide surge of interest in the subject of rights and liberties that had been inspired by events in France and, more significantly, by the publication of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*. Paine, whose influence had already been felt in the area, wrote in a witty, vernacular style that made his book easily accessible whether it was read privately or out loud. Amongst the angry and frustrated cutlers of Sheffield, he soon found many eager converts. It can be no coincidence that within six months of the ending of the dispute a group of 'Five or Six Mechanics', some of whom were almost certainly cutlers, had founded the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information

Introduction

The Act of 1791 had not restored tranquillity to the cutlery trades nor had it quietened the minds of its members. The trades were still rent by divisions and tensions that were further exacerbated as cutlers realised that they were, in many cases, worse off than they had been in 1784. Nor were these continuing problems confined to the cutlery trades – in one way or another, the dispute had affected the whole town and there were many who identified themselves with the plight of the cutlers. Sheffield was still a town in crisis.

This chapter will firstly examine how, less than a month after the Act was passed and only a week after the ‘Priestley Riots’ in Birmingham, the anger felt by so many in Sheffield exploded into violence in a riot that frightened the authorities to such an extent that the troops were called in. Secondly, it will show how the reformist ideals that were being widely promulgated at the time encouraged many of the townspeople to channel their frustration and their energy in a different and more positive direction – parliamentary and electoral reform – and how this, combined with the lessons that had been learnt during the Freemen’s campaign, led to the formation of what has been described as ‘the first working-class reform association of any consequence’ – the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information.⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰⁴ Goodwin, *Friends*, p. 159.

The Sheffield Riot of 1791

As has been demonstrated in the previous chapters, the dispute within the cutlery trades and its unsatisfactory settlement were not the only sources of discontent in Sheffield. Simmering resentment remained about the quashing of scissorgrinders' strike and also about the perceived miscarriage of justice that had led to the execution of Stevens and Lastley. Many local people were frustrated about the inequities of the current electoral system, many of who were also Dissenters aggrieved about the failure of the campaign to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts. These people believed that their rights as freeborn Englishmen were being denied and that the situation would only be remedied if the British government instituted reforms like those being implemented by the French National Assembly. There were also many in Sheffield, besides the cutlers, who felt threatened by the rapid advance of economic and social change and who had identified with the Freemen in their struggle.⁵⁰⁵ As a result of the issues and debates that had come to the fore during the dispute, they, like the Freemen, had come to understand that they too were being denied their rights as freeborn Englishmen.

Debate about reform and particularly about the actions of the French had been given added impetus by the publication, in November 1790, of Edmund

⁵⁰⁵ In May 1791, there had been a strike in the local shoe trade, for example, following the decision of a number of master shoemakers to enter into an agreement not to increase wages for seven years. *Sheffield Register*, May 13th 1791.

Burke's book *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in which Burke reiterated the view that he had expressed during the parliamentary debate on the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts that the revolution in France was not the result of a widespread popular desire for reform, but the work of a manipulative few. He accepted that reform was, occasionally, necessary, but condemned the whole-scale destruction of the old order in France, arguing that the best societies and institutions were those that had evolved organically, not those that were imposed without any trial or precedent. This book inspired the publication of numerous articles, pamphlets and books both for and against Burke's hypothesis. His most famous, and influential, critic, however, was Thomas Paine who, in March 1791, published the first part of *Rights of Man*. Paine praised the reforms instituted by the National Assembly in France and argued forcibly that a true, representative government should be established in Britain and that there should be no role in it for placemen and pensioners. He also argued that feudal relics such as the hereditary principle, tithes and game laws should be abolished and he urged political reformers to base their arguments on the natural rights of *every* man instead of on dubious Anglo-Saxon precedents.

As has been discussed previously, it is possible that Paine may have discussed many of the arguments that he elucidated in *Rights of Man* with reformers in the Sheffield area prior to its publication. The book itself was published when representatives of the Freeman's Committee were in London and they may well

have bought a copy, particularly since Paine was a man whose name was known to them.⁵⁰⁶ Joseph Gales certainly had a copy by the end of April 1791 when he published a substantial extract in the *Register*.⁵⁰⁷ He also published a review, which he undoubtedly wrote himself, comparing Burke's *Reflections* with Paine's *Rights of Man*:

Mr. B. is the polished and playful courtier, who *dances in his chains*; Mr. P. is the stern republican, who *exults in his liberty*, and treats with equal freedom the monarch and the peasant. In a word, without subscribing implicitly to every principle which our author advances, we cannot in justice withhold this testimony to the work before us, that it is one of the most curious, original and interesting publications, which the singular vicissitudes of modern politics has produced.⁵⁰⁸

Gales continued to publish extracts from *Rights of Man* throughout the early summer months of 1791, and on June 17th advertised that he had copies of the book itself for sale.⁵⁰⁹ By mid-July 1791, when the tensions that had been simmering in the town for some considerable time finally erupted, the sentiments expressed in *Rights of Man* had been widely circulated in Sheffield

⁵⁰⁶ The first edition of *Rights of Man* to be issued in significant numbers was published by J. S. Jordan on March 13th 1791. However, an earlier edition had been published by a man named Johnson in early February 1791, although very few copies were printed. Collins, *Thomas Paine*, p. 49.

⁵⁰⁷ *Sheffield Register*, April 29th 1791.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, June 17th 1791.

where they found a ready and eager audience amongst many of the frustrated and angry people of the town.⁵¹⁰ The trigger for the eruption of violence was the enclosure of almost six thousand acres of common land on Hallam Moor.

The subject of enclosure was one that caused much discussion amongst eighteenth century commentators – as it continues to do amongst historians today.⁵¹¹ In the late eighteenth century, those who supported enclosure argued that it was in the national interest: if small farmers were forced to become wage-labourers, population growth would be encouraged because labourers tended to marry earlier and were thus likely to have more children. They also argued that wage dependency would encourage discipline. Those who opposed enclosure argued that commoners provided an endless supply of personnel for the army and navy and that the national interest was better served if more people were able to live independently without being reliant upon wages. One of the most vehement opponents of enclosure was Richard Price, whose book on the subject, *Observations on Reversionary Payments* (1771), ran to at least six editions. He believed that enclosure concentrated wealth; ruined small farmers and forced them and their families to move into towns where they

⁵¹⁰ In December 1791, an anonymous correspondent to Henry Zouch claimed that many of those who had been involved in the riots that occurred in Sheffield in July 1791 were ‘professed Disciples of Mr Payne [sic]’. Sheffield Archives. WWM/F44/2, anonymous to Henry Zouch, December 28th 1791. Zouch was the rector of Swillington and also held the living of Tankersley. He was chaplain to the Marchioness of Rockingham and a West Riding magistrate.

⁵¹¹ For a survey of the various arguments put forward by both eighteenth century writers and modern historians see J. M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England 1700-1820*. (Cambridge, 1993).

swelled the ranks of unskilled labourers; and that it raised the price of food. Most seriously of all, he argued, it destroyed equality – ‘the consequences [of enclosure] may in time prove that the whole kingdom will consist of gentry and beggars, or grandees and slaves’.⁵¹²

As has been noted in previous chapters, Price had many supporters in Sheffield, most notably Joseph Gales and a number of influential Dissenting ministers. It would be reasonable to assume, therefore, that many of them would have shared his anti-enclosure views and that they would have disseminated these views around the town. Nevertheless, the first three local Enclosure Acts do not appear to have inspired any significant popular protest. The first, obtained in 1779, allowed for the enclosure of about eight hundred acres of common land in Ecclesall.⁵¹³ It was followed, in 1784, by an Act to enclose land in Ecclesfield and Wadsley and, in 1788, by an Act to enclose land in Brightside.⁵¹⁴ Local reaction to the Act to enclose land on Hallam Moor, however, was very different: not only was there considerable popular protest, but also the protest descended into riot.

Some historians have claimed that local people were angry about the plans to enclose Hallam Moor because it would have caused the closure of Sheffield

⁵¹² Richard Price, *Observations on Reversionary Payments* (1771), quoted in *ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵¹³ Paulus, *Ecclesall*, p. 28. Enoch Trickett was allotted one perch of land as a result of the Ecclesall enclosure. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁵¹⁴ Hey, *History*, p. 109.

Racecourse.⁵¹⁵ This is unlikely to have been the case because the races had not been held since 1781 and although there was, understandably, considerable local disappointment about the ending of this popular social event, by 1791 there cannot have been many who believed that there was a realistic possibility that the races would be reinstated.⁵¹⁶ The most likely explanation for the unprecedented outburst of popular protest is that in 1791 - unlike in 1779, 1774 and to a certain extent, even 1788 – the people of Sheffield were far more politically aware. They were conscious of their rights and liberties and aware of the many contemporary arguments surrounding these issues. Enclosure meant the loss of ancient rights, and by 1791 many people in the town were sensitive about such threats.

The Act allowing the enclosure of Hallam Moor was passed on June 6th 1791 and on July 13th, the enclosure commissioners – Revd. James Wilkinson, Joseph Ward (who was the Master Cutler) and Vincent Eyre – began their perambulation of the land to be enclosed. A few days later, the surveyors attempted to mark out the new boundaries but were prevented from doing so by a crowd, allegedly of thousands. Over the course of the following week, the

⁵¹⁵ See, for example, *ibid.*

⁵¹⁶ The Sheffield Races had been inaugurated in about 1711, probably by the Town Trustees, and by the 1770s the Race meeting, in late May/early June, was an important three-day social event that was attended by all sections of Hallamshire society. They probably ended because they had been superseded both as a venue and as a society event by the Doncaster races, which had been moved to a new course, on Town Moor, in 1779. See Colin Cooper, 'Sheffield Races', *T.H.A.S.*, 9 (1969). The races were celebrated in two of Mather's songs: *Sheffield Races Number 1* and *Sheffield Races Number 2* in Wilson, *Songs*, pp. 11-13.

situation deteriorated. There were reports of prominent citizens being threatened and of slogans such as 'No Taxes', 'No Corn Bill' and even 'No King' being daubed on doors and walls.⁵¹⁷ The authorities were considerably alarmed, and frightened, not least because of the serious riots that had occurred in Birmingham a week earlier (the Priestley riots) which, according to Joseph Gales, had caused upwards of £100,000 worth of damage.⁵¹⁸

On July 23rd, the enclosure commissioners wrote to the Home Secretary asking for immediate military assistance, citing the intimidation of 'the most respectable inhabitants' and claiming that 'many treasonable inscriptions' had been 'daily repeated upon the walls and doors in several places in this town for several weeks past'. They also claimed that men who had been involved in the Birmingham riot had come to Sheffield and were inciting the crowd to violence.⁵¹⁹ On the face of it, this would seem to have been unlikely: the Birmingham riot was a 'Church and King' riot during which Dissenters and their property were targeted; the riot in Sheffield was, ostensibly, about the enclosure of Hallam Moor though, in reality, it was the result of the popular venting of anger over a myriad of issues, not least frustration about the outcome of the Freemen's campaign.⁵²⁰ However, so soon after the event, it is possible that the authorities in Sheffield did not know the full details of what had

⁵¹⁷ NA/HO42/19, fo. 54, quoted in Paulus *Ecclesall*, p.29; Donnelly and Baxter 'Sheffield and the English Revolutionary Tradition', p.92.

⁵¹⁸ *Sheffield Register*, July 22nd 1791.

⁵¹⁹ NA/HO42/19, fo. 54.

⁵²⁰ For a description and analysis of the Birmingham riot see R. B. Rose, 'The Priestley Riots of 1791', *Past and Present*, 18 (1960).

happened in Birmingham, and knew only that there had been a serious riot and that, for the first time in almost forty years, a similar event was now in progress in Sheffield. But Joseph Gales also claimed that there were ‘several suspicious persons’ from Birmingham in the town who had attempted ‘to stir up a spirit of dissension among certain of the inhabitants’, so it is possible that the claims were true.⁵²¹ There were, after all, numerous trade links between the two towns and many of those who worked in the local plating industry were from Birmingham. They had a very poor reputation - according to one contemporary ‘the journeymen platers were, as a body, the most unsteady, depraved and idle of all workmen. They were not only depraved themselves, but a source of depravity in others’.⁵²²

The authorities in London were also alarmed about the situation in Sheffield, following on as it did so soon after the Birmingham riot. They would also have been aware (or at least they would quickly have been made aware of the fact) that Sheffield had been a town in crisis for some considerable time. There may also have already been concern in some quarters about the spread of radical ideas in the town and about the influence of Paine’s theories – particularly in the light of the slogans that had purportedly been painted on walls and doors. The government ordered troops to be deployed and on July 27th a detachment of Light Dragoons marched into the town. A crowd gathered to watch its arrival

⁵²¹ *Sheffield Register*, July 29th 1791.

⁵²² Roberts, *Autobiography*, pp. 37-8.

and by late evening hundreds of people had assembled in front of the Tontine Inn, not all of whom, according to Gales, were ‘the most peaceably disposed’.⁵²³ Violence erupted when a group of townspeople began to smash open the windows and doors of the town’s gaol, freeing all of the prisoners. A large section of the crowd then set off for Broom Hall, the home of James Wilkinson, who was undoubtedly targeted because of his role as both a magistrate and an enclosure commissioner. Wilkinson was not at home, but before the soldiers could disperse them the rioters broke all of his windows and set fire to his library and to his hayricks. They then returned to the town where they attacked the homes of Vincent Eyre and James Wheat, who were both members of the enclosure commission. Wheat was also a significant moneylender. Order was not fully restored until the following day when the Light Dragoons were joined by two troops of Heavy Dragoons from York.⁵²⁴ Thirteen people were arrested – eight were subsequently discharged for lack of evidence and five were sent to York Assizes. Only one of the five was found guilty: John Bennet, an eighteen-year old parish apprentice, was convicted of arson and was hanged in September 1791.⁵²⁵

A week after the riot, Joseph Gales, somewhat surprisingly claimed that the town had been ‘restored to perfect tranquillity’ – in view of the fact that none of

⁵²³ *Sheffield Register*, July 29th 1791.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.* Wheat was eventually paid over £185 for damage caused to his property, Wilkinson £190, and the Duke of Norfolk (who owned Eyre’s home) £54. Wilkinson also claimed a further £409 for the loss of his hay. *Ibid.*, March 23rd 1792.

⁵²⁵ Bentley, *Sheffield Hanged*, pp. 52-63.

the issues that had provoked the riot had been resolved, both this and his subsequent claim that he had ‘no apprehension of any further riotous proceedings’ would appear to have been grounded in hope rather than in reality and were most probably penned in an attempt to calm frayed nerves.⁵²⁶ Certainly the authorities in London did not share his optimism because they ordered that troops should remain in the town. The following year, work began on the construction of a permanent barracks. The issues that had been the subject of debates prior to the riot were still current and they continued to be the subject of countless discussions and arguments in homes, workshops, and particularly taverns where, according to one of Earl Fitzwilliam’s correspondents, men would meet to discuss ‘some political subject over a cup of Ale’.⁵²⁷ It was probably at one such meeting, in the late autumn of 1791, that a group of ‘Five or Six Mechanics’, decided to form a society that would eventually be called the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information.⁵²⁸

The Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information

During the early 1790s, societies were established in towns and cities across the country whose aim was to persuade the government to institute a wide-ranging programme of parliamentary and electoral reform. Such groups were, of course, not new. For over two decades, organisations such as the Society of the

⁵²⁶ *Sheffield Register*, August 5th 1791.

⁵²⁷ Sheffield Archives, WWM, F44/1, H. Hunter to Fitzwilliam, December 12th 1791.

⁵²⁸ The society was originally called the Association for Constitutional Information, then the Sheffield Constitutional Society and finally the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information.

Supporters of the Bill of Rights, Christopher Wyvill's Association Movement and the Society for Constitutional Information had campaigned for reform, but these groups had been for the propertied classes, the country squires, professionals and the *nouveau riche* manufacturers and merchants, whereas the men who formed, and joined, many of the reform societies of the 1790s were artisans, small shopkeepers and even labourers.⁵²⁹ The catalyst for the formation of these popular reform societies was the French Revolution and the debate that it engendered, but they were also inspired by the activities of the older reform societies, the Dissenters' campaigns for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and the celebrations surrounding the centenary of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Most importantly of all, however, each society was formed against a background of specifically local economic and social circumstances and for many of the ordinary workingmen who became members it was these factors that provided the initial incentives. One of the most important and influential of these new reform societies was the S.S.C.I.

Many historians have written about the S.S.C.I., most notably Albert Goodwin, John Stevenson and E. P. Thompson, and all have acknowledged its pivotal role in the history of late eighteenth-century popular radicalism.⁵³⁰ Goodwin, in fact, described it as 'the first working-class reform association of any consequence' and argued that its organizational structure, which was copied by many other

⁵²⁹ For more on eighteenth century societies, see Clark, *British Clubs*.

⁵³⁰ See, for example, Goodwin, *Friends*; Stevenson, *Artisans*; and Thompson, *Making*.

societies including Thomas Hardy's London Corresponding Society, was one of Sheffield's greatest contributions to English popular radicalism.⁵³¹ John Stevenson, however, has lamented that very little is known about the milieu from which the S.S.C.I. sprang.⁵³² Those historians who have attempted to address this issue have pointed to the absence both of direct aristocratic influence and of resident magistrates and also to the presence of a large number of semi-independent and relatively well-paid skilled craftsmen. These factors, E. P. Thompson argued, combined to make Sheffield 'an ideal centre for Jacobin agitation'.⁵³³ Some historians have also referred to local frustration over the failure of the campaign to secure the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and over the current electoral system; anger about enclosure; and to general economic discontent. But only one, John Baxter, has ever directly referred to the long-running dispute within the cutlery trades: he touched upon it in his doctoral thesis 'The origins of the social war in South Yorkshire: a study of capitalist evolution and labour class realization in one industrial region c.1750-1855'. However, when writing his thesis, Baxter did not have the advantage of access to the Cutlers' Company's own records and so was unaware of many of both the Company's and the Freemen's actions. He was also probably unaware of how all-embracing the power of the Cutlers' Company still was in the late eighteenth century and how, until 1784 at least, its rule over Sheffield's core trades was accepted almost without question.

⁵³¹ Goodwin, *Friends*, p. 159 and p. 170.

⁵³² Stevenson, 'Popular Radicalism', p. 71.

⁵³³ Thompson, *Making*, p. 165.

Consequently, he did not appreciate the magnitude of the Freeman's actions in uniting to oppose that rule. The opening of the Company's records has revealed not only many of the details but also the divisive nature of the Freeman's dispute and, most importantly, how the dispute shifted from one that was purely about economic grievances to one that embraced many aspects of contemporary political debate and how, in the process, the working men of Sheffield became much more politically aware and how they came to believe that they too were freeborn Englishmen whose natural rights were being curtailed. It was the impact of this long-running dispute within the cutlery trades that led Sheffield to be the epicentre of late eighteenth century popular radicalism.

As was noted above, the S.S.C.I. was founded in the late autumn of 1791 by a group of five or six men who wanted to enlighten people about what they believed were the real causes of their 'complaints and sufferings'. Unfortunately, neither the exact date of this meeting nor the identities of the men is known. Tantalising, however, in February 1792 one of Earl Fitzwilliam's correspondents referred to early involvement by 'Journeymen Filesmiths', suggesting that some of its founder members were men who were known to have been active in the Freeman's Campaign.⁵³⁴ However, what is known is that from its inception the S.S.C.I. was primarily a society that was

⁵³⁴ Sheffield Archives, WWM, F44/4, Zouch to Fitzwilliam, February 2nd 1792.

founded and organised by and for ordinary working men.⁵³⁵ But this does not mean that it did not have the support, and, in some cases, active participation from those who were in a higher social group. Samuel Shore, who was himself a member of the S.C.I., was an early supporter, for example, as were the Quakers Abraham Sutcliffe, a local physician, and John Payne, a wealthy farmer and tanner from Newhill Grange, near Rotherham. Enoch Trickett and Joseph Gales, who would not have described themselves as being ‘of the lowest order’, were also to be active participants.⁵³⁶

However, with memories of the summer’s violence and the years of tension that had preceded it fresh in everyone’s minds, there were some who were seriously concerned about the potential threat posed by an organisation like the S.S.C.I. In fact as early as December 2nd 1791 the Society’s committee felt obliged to publish a notice in the *Register*:

We are sorry to find that the Public have been under any Apprehensions of Alarm from the small Association lately formed in this Town through the Reports, probably of some designing People, who have ignorantly or maliciously represented them as dangerous Mobs whose Aim was to subvert the Constitution.⁵³⁷

⁵³⁵ Most of Fitzwilliam’s informants commented on the fact that members of the society were ‘of the lowest order’, a fact that was also supported by Mrs Joseph Gales in her memoirs.

⁵³⁶ Gales, ‘Recollections’, p. 32.

⁵³⁷ *Sheffield Register*, December 2nd 1791.

Quite who these ‘designing People’ were is not clear though it is possible that they included John Russell, an ultra-loyalist cleric and schoolteacher from Dronfield who was to be a vehement and outspoken critic of the S.S.C.I. throughout its existence. In their notice, the committee of the S.S.C.I. invited those who were apprehensive of their plans to attend a meeting where they would see that the society’s affairs were conducted with dignity and order, and they warned the gossipmongers who maligned them ‘seriously to consider the Danger of raising Tumults, which they affect so much to dread’. Their aim, they assured the public, was not to subvert the constitution but ‘to throw in their Mites, at some proper Opportunity, towards attaining by a peaceable Reform, a more equal Representation in the House of Commons (whenever the People of Property and Consequence shall think fit again to come forward)’. This last statement clearly indicates that they were hoping that men who had supported previous reform movements, the Association for example, would re-new their campaign for political reform – as will be seen below, this was a hope shared by many in Sheffield.

On December 19th 1791, the S.S.C.I. published its first *Address* to the public (see appendix E) in which they called on men of all ranks and parties to put aside their differences and to work together for the reformation of the constitution through the restitution of ‘Ancient Liberties’. This was the traditional cry of political reformers. But the S.S.C.I. also made the more radical demand of calling for the reformation of Parliament through ‘an equal

Representation in the House of Commons'.⁵³⁸ Although their ideas were still very much influenced by those who belonged to the 'Norman Yoke' school of political reformers (as is further revealed by the language in which the *Address* is couched), the members of the S.S.C.I. had also been influenced by the writings of Thomas Paine and were calling for what was, in effect, a completely new political system. Unfortunately, the author of this *Address* is not known. Henry Zouch believed that it had been written by someone who was 'well acquainted with Mr. Wyvill's phraseology'.⁵³⁹ This may well have been the case, but its style is very similar to that of an *Address* published by the Freeman's Committee in March 1790 and signed by Enoch Trickett.⁵⁴⁰ As he is known to have been a committee member of the S.S.C.I., it is probable that he had a hand in the composition of this important document. It is also possible that Joseph Gales could have been involved, as he undoubtedly had been in many of the Freeman's publication. However it should be noted that he was probably not a member of the S.S.C.I. in its early days.⁵⁴¹ The *Address* was printed by John Crome, who had printed many of the Freeman's notices and who, like Trickett, is known to have been a member of the S.S.C.I.

The publication of the S.S.C.I.'s *Address* certainly inspired a lively debate, as is revealed by some of the letters that were published in the *Register*. John Payne.

⁵³⁸ Sheffield Archives, WWM, F44/31.

⁵³⁹ Sheffield Archives, WWM, F44/4, Zouch to Fitzwilliam, February 2nd 1792.

⁵⁴⁰ Sheffield Archives, JC1396.

⁵⁴¹ This assumption is based on the fact that there are no references to Joseph Gales involvement in the foundation of the S.S.C.I. in the Gales' papers, nor was he ever mentioned in that context by Fitzwilliam's spies.

writing under the pseudonym ‘Vicinus’, whilst expressing his support for the S.S.C.I.’s aims, castigated the former leaders of the Association as men who preached liberty abroad but who practised tyranny at home, especially with regard to their rights over their land and their tenants:

From such men, with prejudices imbibed both by birth and education – for our Universities cannot be called either the Schools of *liberal opinion, free enquiry, or expansive philosophy* - an attempt sincere in its nature at a reform in Parliament is not to be expected; but, when we see a love of Letters and thirst after Knowledge, pervading the lower orders of the Community, then our hopes [for reform] are built on a different foundation.⁵⁴²

‘A Yorkshire Freeholder’ and ‘Ignotus’ also wrote to express their support for the S.S.C.I.’s aims, but sprang to the Association’s defence asking ‘Vicinus’ if he considered men like Wilkinson and Shore to be tyrants at home.⁵⁴³ ‘Vicinus’ (Payne) replied that if the Associators genuinely wanted reform for the good of all men and not just for their own benefit, they should come forward and join with the members of the S.S.C.I., a proposition that was also supported by ‘a Yorkshire Freeholder’.⁵⁴⁴ As was noted above, this appears to be what the

S.S.C.I. hoped would happen. In fact, by early February 1792 rumours that

⁵⁴² *Sheffield Register*, December 29th 1791.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, January 6th 1792.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, February 17th and March 2nd 1792. The correspondence between the three was published in editions of the *Register* throughout January, February and early March 1792.

Wyvill was considering re-starting his campaign were sufficiently strong that Zouch reported them to Fitzwilliam.⁵⁴⁵ The S.S.C.I.'s disappointment when these rumours proved to be ill-founded was allayed in May 1792 when they were contacted by the M.P. Charles Grey, a known supporter of political reform who had recently formed the Society of the Friends of the People.⁵⁴⁶ When Fitzwilliam heard about this correspondence, he complained to Zouch that Grey's society would provide 'the Leaders they [the S.S.C.I.] had been looking for'.⁵⁴⁷ Whilst this was undoubtedly true (the S.S.C.I. replied to the letter that they were willing to surrender the lead to 'men of more respectable character, and great abilities'), I do not believe that the S.S.C.I.'s desire for members of the ruling class to take the lead in the campaign for political reform undermines my earlier argument that the period saw the beginning of a sense of socio-economic class-consciousness in Sheffield (see chapter five).⁵⁴⁸ Grey and his associates were men who were perceived to have influence in government circles, the kind of men who could achieve political reform – and this is what the S.S.C.I. wanted. They and their supporters, like many contemporary reformers, believed that political reform would lead to economic reform, and economic reform was what was needed to alleviate 'their complaints and

⁵⁴⁵ Sheffield Archives, WWM, F44/4, Zouch to Fitzwilliam, February 2nd 1792.

⁵⁴⁶ Sheffield Archives, WWM, F44/16.

⁵⁴⁷ Sheffield Archives, WWM, E234/25, Fitzwilliam to Zouch, June 5th 1792.

⁵⁴⁸ State Trials, vol. 24, col. 1026, quoted in Goodwin, *Friends*, p.210; Sheffield Archives, WWM, F44/16.

sufferings'.⁵⁴⁹ It should also be remembered that the sense of class that had begun to develop during the course of the Freeman's dispute was very much in its infancy and may still have been restricted to the confines of Sheffield society.

The growth of the S.S.C.I. was phenomenal: from an initial five or six in the autumn of 1791 to about 600 by the end of January 1792, rising to an estimated 1,500 in March 1792.⁵⁵⁰ Bearing in mind the demographics of Sheffield at the end of the eighteenth century, it would be reasonable to assume that many, if not the majority, of these members were employed in the cutlery trades. As was noted above, journeymen filesmiths were amongst the Society's earliest members and in a letter to Christopher Wyvill, Samuel Shore noted that a number of the S.S.C.I.'s leaders had previously been involved in the Freeman's Campaign:

The leading people in it [the S.S.C.I.] are considered in general as persons of good character. It has been an objection against some of the Members that they have been persons fond of fishing in troubled waters, meaning, it is supposed, the late Corporation Dispute'.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁹ One of Fitzwilliam's spies reported that many of those who supported the S.S.C.I. did so 'with a View to reduce the public Expenditure which is a subject much talked of amongst the lower Classes who expect a Reduction of Taxes and of the necessaries of Life'. Sheffield Archives, WWM, F44/5, anonymous to Zouch, January 31st 1792.

⁵⁵⁰ Sheffield Archives, WWM, F44/5, anonymous to Zouch, January 31st 1792.

⁵⁵¹ Wyvill, *Political Papers*, vol. 5, p. 48.

He may have been referring to men like Enoch Trickett, Edward Smith, and Benjamin Damm, who had all played a prominent role in the Freeman's Campaign and who are known to have been committee members of the S.S.C.I.

The rapid increase in the S.S.C.I.'s membership was, of course, partly a consequence of the widespread enthusiasm for reform that had been inspired by the French Revolution. But it is unlikely that this enthusiasm would have affected, or inspired, quite so many people in the town if the Freeman's campaign had not taken place. The campaign had awakened in cutlers and, by association, in other workingmen in the area an interest in many topics that previously do not appear to have concerned them. They had begun to believe that the fundamental flaw that was damaging the local cutlery trades for the majority mirrored the fundamental flaw that was damaging the nation – namely, corruption of the original constitution. And they understood that things could only be rectified if the basic building block of the constitution was restored – namely the right of the governed both to choose and to censure those by whom they were governed. Inspired, and emboldened, by the Freeman's campaign, many ordinary working men now believed that they themselves, and not just those whom they consider to be their social superiors, should and could unite to persuade the government to institute reforms that would benefit the country as a whole.

The S.S.C.I.'s recruitment campaign was also greatly aided by the ease with which they were able to disseminate their aims and ideals throughout the region. As was demonstrated during the Freeman's Campaign, a vibrant culture of discussion and debate existed within the town's innumerable small workshops and taverns. The S.S.C.I. was also fortunate that there were two radical printers and publishers in the town: Joseph Gales and John Crome. Through them, the Society was able to disseminate information through propagandist pamphlets and tracts, some of which were original works and some of which were reprints.⁵⁵² Gales, meanwhile, continued to publish extracts from reformist books, pamphlets and speeches, both individually and in the *Register*. On April 3rd 1792, he and Matthew Campbell Browne began publication of *The Patriot*, a fortnightly paper that contained extracts from previously published political works, articles on reform politics and Anglo-French relations, translations of decrees issued by the French National Assembly, letters and editorials.⁵⁵³

Arguably one of the most important boosts to the S.S.C.I.'s membership, however, came in January 1792 when Thomas Paine gave the society permission to publish a pamphlet edition of the first part of *Rights of Man*.

Interestingly this was not, as has often been claimed, published by Gales but by

⁵⁵² Seaman, 'Reform Politics', p. 220.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 220-1. Gales gave forward notice of the publication of *The Patriot* in the *Register* on March 2nd 1792 when he said that it would be 'a work calculated to disseminate ... knowledge among all Ranks of People'. The paper was published fortnightly until July 30th 1793 after which there were two more editions at irregular intervals.

John Crome. On January 12th 1792 Fitzwilliam was informed that 'there are now in Cromes Press 1500 Copies of Mr Paines Pamphlet which are to be sold at 3d each'.⁵⁵⁴ That Paine's work was used to encourage new members to join the S.S.C.I. is proven by a letter sent by one of its members, Isaac Sowter, on March 7th 1792 in which he enclosed a copy of *Rights of Man*. He told the unknown recipient that he hoped that the book would encourage him and his friends and neighbours to join in the work of the S.S.C.I.⁵⁵⁵

In February 1792 Paine published the second part of *Rights of Man* in which he outlined how his reforms would lead to the creation of a welfare state. Plans for maternity and family allowances; a marriage allowance; education grants; old age pensions; funeral benefits; for a time when poor children and old people would not be forced to beg for food and when poor widows would not be sent back to the parish of their birth when their husbands died, were all bound to appeal to men who often found life a struggle, who worked hard but still found it difficult to maintain their families. It is no wonder that, as one contemporary

⁵⁵⁴ See, for example, Goodwin, *Friends*, p. 177, and, more recently, Clive Emsley, *Britain and the French Revolution* (Harlow, 2000), p. 12. Sheffield Archives, WWM, F121/11, Charles Bowns to Fitzwilliam, January 12th 1792. Bowns enclosed papers with this letter which he said were being read in all the workshops in the town but, unfortunately, these have not survived. There is a copy of Crome's edition of *Rights of Man* in the British Library, BL 1578/8369(1).

⁵⁵⁵ Sheffield Archives, WWM, F44/21, Isaac Sowter to anonymous, March 7th 1792. Sowter also enclosed '6 Vishans' which *may* have been copies of *Vision: A Satire on the French Revolution* (1790) by 'Vision'. He also enclosed a knife and fork which suggest that he may have been a cutler although he does not appear in the Cutlers' Company's records.

complained, so many Sheffielders adopted *Rights of Man* as their bible.⁵⁵⁶ In fact, such was its popularity in May 1792 Paine gave the S.S.C.I. permission to publish a one-volume edition incorporating both parts. By the end of the month, an anonymous correspondent informed Henry Zouch that ‘the Doctrines of Mr Payne [sic] seem to have laid strong hold on the minds of the lower classes who have every Thing to win and nothing to lose’.⁵⁵⁷

The rapid increase in membership inevitably brought with it organizational problems, but this was something that those who had been leaders of the Freemen’s campaign had dealt with before. They had solved the problem by asking each branch of the trades to nominate six reputable people to serve on a General Committee; the leaders of the S.S.C.I. solved the problem by dividing their society into tythings: groups of ten people who would nominate one of their number to represent them at the next level, where another representative would be nominated to be a member of the Committee which would meet once a month.⁵⁵⁸ Some of the group meetings are known to been held in local taverns whilst the Freemasons’ Hall was usually the venue for the monthly meetings.⁵⁵⁹ This organizational system allowed the S.S.C.I. to expand without the problem of having to find ever-larger meeting places. It also meant that meetings were easier to control and organise and it helped to prevent factionalism. More

⁵⁵⁶ Roberts, *Autobiography*, p. 44.

⁵⁵⁷ Sheffield Archives, WWM, F44/18, anonymous to Zouch, May 29th 1792.

⁵⁵⁸ *House of Commons, Select Committees: Reports Misc., 1794*, vol. 14, no. 113, quoted in Seaman, ‘Reform Politics’, p. 218.

⁵⁵⁹ *Sheffield Register*, February 24th 1792.

importantly, it fostered a sense of democracy because it enabled every member to have a voice in choosing his group's representative. In early March 1792, the S.S.C.I. recommended their organizational system to the London Corresponding Society (LCS) following a request for advice from its founder, Thomas Hardy.⁵⁶⁰

The S.S.C.I. also recommended that Hardy should contact Horne Tooke, a leading member of the newly invigorated Society for Constitutional Information, to whom they themselves wrote on March 14th 1792 asking if twelve of their members could be elected as associate members of his society, a request that was eventually granted.⁵⁶¹ The twelve were Joseph Gales; John Payne of Newhill Grange; David Martin, engraver and former partner of Gales; Matthew Dodsworth, cutler; James Horsfield, grocer; Robert Hadfield (occupation unknown); William Broomhead, filesmith; John Alcock, inkpot maker; Joseph Lee, filesmith; Benjamin Damm, tailor; John Harrison, razorsmith; and Joseph [surname unknown].⁵⁶² Damm and Harrison are both known to have been actively involved in the Freemen's Campaign and, in February 1792, Damm had given a speech at one of the S.S.C.I.'s general

⁵⁶⁰ *Selections from the Papers of the London Corresponding Society 1792-1799* ed. Mary Thale (Cambridge, 1983), p.7.

⁵⁶¹ NA/TS24/1/6, *Appendix to the Second Report of the Committee of Secrecy*.

⁵⁶² *Ibid.* When Earl Fitzwilliam heard that Payne was one of the S.S.C.I.'s delegates, he threatened to evict him from the tenancy of one of the estate's farms. Payne claimed that he did not know that he had been chosen as a delegate and that he was not a member of the S.S.C.I., but admitted being a member of the Society for Constitutional Information. See Sheffield Archives, WWM, F71/10-12.

meetings on *True Representation and the Unity of Man*, a speech that was subsequently printed by Crome.⁵⁶³

In early May 1792, there was once again trouble on the streets of Sheffield. Whilst the catalyst for the trouble is known - an altercation between local inhabitants and some of the soldiers who had been billeted in the town since the previous summer – contemporary opinions were divided over the causes of the altercation itself. Some claimed that there had been antagonism between the soldiers and townspeople for a considerable time – antagonism that was probably primarily due to an understandable resentment amongst the townspeople at being forced to have soldiers in their midst and, in fact, billeted in their homes and taverns, and also, no doubt, to a certain amount of arrogance and swagger amongst the soldiers themselves. However, there were also some who believed that the trouble had been deliberately orchestrated on the Government's orders because of concern about increasing fraternisation between the soldiers and members of the S.S.C.I. and the consequent spread of Painite ideas amongst the troops. This was certainly the view held by John Harrison, a leading member of the S.S.C.I. and former activist in the Freemen's campaign, who repeated it in a pamphlet that was published in 1794.⁵⁶⁴ It is impossible to know if there was in any truth in this conspiracy theory but there is strong evidence that the authorities were concerned about fraternization

⁵⁶³ British Library, 8007.bbb.10

⁵⁶⁴ John Harrison, *A Letter to the Rt Hon Henry Dundas* (Sheffield, 1794), quoted in Baxter, 'Origins of the Social War', p. 117.

between the soldiers and the S.S.C.I.⁵⁶⁵ If one accepts the conspiracy theory, it may also be significant that the trouble erupted when both of the local magistrates, Wilkinson and Athorpe, were away from home and consequently the situation had to be dealt with by magistrates who had little or no direct connections with the town or its recent upheavals.

However, what is irrefutable is that an altercation did take place between a group of soldiers and some townspeople on the evening of May 6th. This altercation led to an angry crowd gathering in front of the Tontine where the army officers were staying. There followed three days of confrontation and intimidation by both sides. Numerous properties were damaged and a number of people were, reputedly, injured by the soldiers. Because both of the local magistrates were away from home, the principal inhabitants were forced to seek help from magistrates in Rotherham, Francis Edwards and Samuel Tooker. They were eventually able to restore some semblance of order, though an undercurrent of tension remained and by the end of the month peace had still not been fully restored.⁵⁶⁶

By this time, the authorities, both locally and nationally, were becoming increasingly alarmed about the strength of the burgeoning popular reform societies and especially by their growing adherence to Painite doctrines and

⁵⁶⁵ Sheffield Archives, F44/11, Zouch to Fitzwilliam, May 10th 1792.

⁵⁶⁶ *Sheffield Register*, May 11th 1792; Sheffield Archives, WWM, F44/11-13, F44/18.

their enthusiastic support for the reforms being instituted across the Channel in France. Nationally, this concern had been further exacerbated by the formation of Grey's Society of the Friends of the People which, as was noted earlier, some believed would provide leadership and focus for the numerous local societies. Earl Fitzwilliam, conscious of what was happening in his own backyard, was particularly concerned. He wrote to Henry Zouch,

When members of Parliament began to tell the lowest orders of the people that they had rights of which they were bereaved by others; that to recover these rights, they had the power of doing so, and to effect this, advocates and Leaders were ready at their call – it became no longer a matter of indifference, and grave men felt the necessity of making stand in the outset.⁵⁶⁷

The stand made by 'the grave men' led to a Royal Proclamation against Seditious Writings and Publications (May 21st 1792) that was specifically aimed against Paine but which also called upon loyal subjects to thwart attempts to subvert the government and the constitution. Towns around the country responded with a flurry of Loyal Addresses and on June 11th a public meeting was called to decide the form of the Address to be sent from Sheffield. However, following a speech by William Camage, one of the S.S.C.I.'s leaders, the proposal that Sheffield should even send an Address was overwhelmingly

⁵⁶⁷ Sheffield Archives, WWM, E234/25, Fitzwilliam to Zouch, June 5th 1792.

defeated.⁵⁶⁸ Two days later, when it was discovered that those who were in favour of sending an Address were holding a second, closed meeting in the Cutlers' Hall, a crowd, reputedly of thousands, gathered and threatened to pull the Hall down. Once again, a riot appeared to be imminent. But trouble was averted when Joseph Gales called a counter meeting in the Town Hall, which was across the street from the Cutlers' Hall, where he was able to calm the situation by persuading the crowd that they had already made their voices heard and by convincing them to 'oblige even those who differ in opinion with you, to respect you, by showing that you respect yourselves'.⁵⁶⁹ The crowd dispersed singing Mather's song *God Save Great Thomas Paine* to the tune of the National Anthem:

God save great Thomas Paine
 His 'Rights of Man' to explain
 To every soul.
 He makes the blind to see
 What dupes and slaves they be,
 And points out liberty,
 From pole to pole.⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁶⁸ Gales, 'Recollections', p. 37.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-9: *Sheffield Register*, June 15th 1792. An Address was sent from Sheffield but it had less than one hundred signatures. Seaman, 'Reform Politics', p. 221.

⁵⁷⁰ Mather, *God Save Great Thomas Paine*, verse one, in Wilson, *Songs*, pp. 56-7. The song has six verses.

It is little wonder that when Colonel de Lancey arrived in Sheffield a month later during his tour of the North and Midlands to assess the reliability of the troops, he reported back to the War Office ‘that the seditious doctrines of Paine and the factious people who are endeavouring to disturb the peace of the Country, had extended to a degree very much beyond my conception, and indeed they seem with great judgement to have chosen this [town] as the centre of all their seditious machinations’.⁵⁷¹

Throughout 1792, the S.S.C.I. continued to flourish and amongst the majority of the townspeople support for the French revolutionaries remained undimmed. In July 1792 the Duke of Brunswick declared that Austrian and Prussian forces would enter France to restore Louis XVI to his rightful authority. In response, Parisian radicals attacked the Tuileries and overthrew the monarchy. In early September, a great many nobles and priests were murdered (the ‘September Massacres’). On September 20th, the Prussian army was defeated at Valmy and on September 21st the French Republic was declared. Many people in England were horrified by this turn of events, but the enthusiasm of the S.S.C.I. and its supporters was unabated. On October 15th they organised a patriotic fête during which an effigy of the ‘Duke of Brunswick filled with combustible matter’ was fired upon.⁵⁷² They also organised an Address to the National Convention in Paris praising the Convention’s actions and criticising those of the British

⁵⁷¹ NA/HO/42/20, Colonel de Lancey to Secretary at War, June 13th 1792. quoted in Stevenson, *Artisans*, pp. 52-53.

⁵⁷² Stevenson, *Artisans*, p. 19.

government. This petition, which reputedly had been approved by twenty thousand of the town's 'merchants, manufacturers, workmen and artisans', was presented to the Convention on November 22nd.⁵⁷³ A few weeks earlier, the toast 'To the Sovereignty of the People' was drunk before the Loyal Toast at the Revolution Dinner that had been held in the Tontine. There had also been toasts to 'The Rights of the People', 'The Members of the National Convention in France' and 'The armies of France'.⁵⁷⁴ On November 27th, another fête was held to celebrate 'the emancipation of the Netherlands; and the erection of the sacred standard of Liberty in Flanders and Brabant'.⁵⁷⁵

By December 1792, the Prime Minister, William Pitt, was sufficiently concerned about the possibility of a revolutionary uprising in Britain that he recalled Parliament, called out the militia and ordered the Tower of London to be re-fortified. The Government also issued another Proclamation against seditious writings. Paine was prosecuted *in absentia* for sedition (he had fled to France). Moderates, once again, organised Loyal Addresses and many joined organisations such as John Reeves' newly formed Association against Republicans and Levellers.

⁵⁷³ *Sheffield Register*, October 19th 1792.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, November 9th 1792.

⁵⁷⁵ *Manchester Herald*, December 1st 1792, quoted in Stevenson, *Artisans*, pp. 59-60. Gales also gave details of the fete in the *Register*, November 30th 1792.

The principal inhabitants of Sheffield shared the government's concerns. They knew that there had been a volatile atmosphere in the town for a number of years and that in many ways Sheffield was like a powder keg waiting to erupt. Social order was under serious threat and it was well known that many of the alleged *provocateurs* were the same men who had been instrumental in attempting to undermine the order and authority of the Cutlers' Company. There is some evidence that attempts were made to undermine the S.S.C.I. by portraying them as disloyal revolutionaries. In November 1792, for example, 'A Grinder' had written to the *Register* asking what the members of the S.S.C.I. had done to deserve having such calumnies written about them:

... we are become very obnoxious to the ministerial party and their hireling writers, because we have formed ourselves into a Constitutional Society; have found out that we are entitled to certain rights and privileges as well as our superiors; and that a vote in the election of a member of parliament is one of these rights.⁵⁷⁶

On December 31st, the town's moderates, led by two former advocates of parliamentary reform, Samuel Shore and James Wilkinson, organised a public meeting where they proposed another Loyal Address. But, once again, the proposal was overwhelmingly defeated inspiring Mather to write his rallying song, *Britons, Awake*. This included the lines:

⁵⁷⁶ *Sheffield Register*, November 9th 1792.

Like Jericho's walls, the address tumbled down
 Which gave satisfaction to thousands in town
 But gave the vile crew both the cholic and gripes'.⁵⁷⁷

The guillotining of Louis XVI and the declaration of war between England and France did not deter or disillusion the S.S.C.I. In fact, in mid-February, they agreed a series of Resolutions condemning all war as evil and thanking Fox, Grey, the Duke of Norfolk and others for their attempts to avert war with France. In March, they resolved to send missionaries into the loyalist heartlands and John Harrison duly set off to establish constitutional societies in Coventry and Birmingham.⁵⁷⁸ On April 8th 1793, an estimated 4,000 people attended a mass meeting on Castle Hill where it was agreed that a petition should be drawn up calling for the radical reform of parliament. This petition was reputedly signed by 5,000 people and was presented to the House of Commons by Henry Duncombe on May 2nd where it was rejected by 108 votes to 29 because of its 'disrespectful' language.⁵⁷⁹ The S.S.C.I. reacted with fury and in a public notice they lambasted Wilberforce who, they claimed, had not shown his famed 'liberality' when he called the petitioners, his constituents, 'Jacobins' and had ascribed to them views that were an insult to their characters.⁵⁸⁰ For many, the Commons' reaction revived memories of the contempt with which they

⁵⁷⁷ Mather, *Britons Awake*, in Wilson, *Songs*, pp. 35-36.

⁵⁷⁸ *Sheffield Register*, February 15th and March 22nd 1793; Baxter, 'Origins of the Social War', p. 122. Harrison became the president of the Birmingham society.

⁵⁷⁹ *Sheffield Register*, April 5th, April 12th and May 10th 1793.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, May 10th 1793.

believed the Cutlers' Company had reacted to the Freemen's requests for reform. Arthur Jewitt junior later recalled that 'the petitions of the Freemen like those presented at another certain great house were treated with disrespect and their complaints made a matter of mockery and jest.'⁵⁸¹

The summer of 1793 brought the first rumours that plans were being made for an armed insurrection in Sheffield. In August, a letter was sent to Fitzwilliam informing him that young men had been seen exercising and drilling on Crooksmoor under the leadership of a journeyman cutler who had previously been a soldier.⁵⁸² These rumours, which appear to have been widely believed, were nevertheless mocked by Gales:

Brave Sheffielders! The simple circumstance of a few hearty fellows of this town, armed with *broomsticks* and other equally formidable weapons, meeting on Crooksmoor to learn the military exercise, with the *murderous* intent of *killing* Time, has so alarmed the neighbourhood, that nobody can sleep in their beds for it. In a word, at the name of *Sheffield* every face turns as white and as grave as a judge's wig.⁵⁸³

⁵⁸¹ Jewitt, 'Passages', p. 39.

⁵⁸² Sheffield Archives, WWM, F44/44, H. Lunn to Fitzwilliam, August 10th 1793.

⁵⁸³ *Sheffield Register*, July 12th 1793.

Whilst these rumours and the fear that they generated are symptomatic of the neuroses that one would expect to find in a country that was at war and that also felt threatened by subversive elements within its own population, they nevertheless indicate that there was a real belief that there might be a popular uprising and that England might be heading down the same route as France. One also has to wonder why men were drilling on the Moor, if indeed they were. Were they just passing time or were they reformers preparing to protect themselves in case of assault by over-zealous loyalists? There were certainly some very zealous loyalists in the area whose supporters had increased as the situation had worsened in France. In September, a group of them, supported – or maybe encouraged - by some soldiers, had surrounded Gales' home and threatened to break every window. Their shouts, however, had alerted Gales' friends, and a crowd of 500, singing Mather's song *God Save Great Thomas Paine*, had gathered round to protect him, his family and his property.⁵⁸⁴ The most outspoken of these ultra-loyalists was the cleric John Russell (see p.306). He had been one of the principal instigators of both of the failed Loyal Addresses and had subsequently been lampooned by Mather in *Britons, Awake:*

When R...l discovered his scheme was made void,

Altho' a black hell-hound some thought he'd have dy'd,

An ague fit seized him, convulsions ensued,

⁵⁸⁴ Joseph Gales to Joseph Aston, September 26th 1793, quoted in *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of James Montgomery*, ed. J. Holland and J. Everitt (London, 1854), vol. 1, p. 168.

And all the way home fire and brimstone he spued.⁵⁸⁵

Russell was a prolific writer to the *Register*, often using the pseudonym ‘Observator’. He was especially critical of the S.S.C.I. and, in fact, was reputed to have said that he would not rest until it had been destroyed.⁵⁸⁶ The S.S.C.I. certainly believed that he was the source of many of the malicious rumours that had been circulated about it and its members. On October 14th 1793, Enoch Trickett chaired a mass meeting that had been convened to consider Russell’s latest ‘scurrilous’ missive to the local newspapers when it was decided that a letter, signed by Trickett, should be printed in the *Register* refuting Russell’s allegations point by point and expressing their support for Gales and his paper.

The letter ended with a postscript:

We are obliged to you for the intimation you [Russell] give us in your Postscript, that you mean to vent more of your poisonous venom under the signature of OBSERVATOR. Frequent evacuations from so filthy a fountain, may, perhaps, in time, somewhat clear the stream – though we despair of its being ever entirely purified. We are only sorry for the poor Printers, who are to be so often exposed to the contagion of so infected and pestilential an atmosphere as must result from so much morbid

⁵⁸⁵ Mather, *Britons Awake*, in Wilson, *Songs*, pp. 35-36.

⁵⁸⁶ *Sheffield Register*, October 25th 1793.

matter being deposited in so small a circumference as a printing Room.⁵⁸⁷

By the end of 1793, the local economy was suffering from the effects of the war and the S.S.C.I., whose funds had never been large, was reputed to be in considerable debt.⁵⁸⁸ Nevertheless, in November they decided to send Matthew Campbell Browne, co-editor with Gales of *The Patriot*, to represent them at the Convention in Edinburgh. Brown was, in fact, in the chair when the Provost arrived to dissolve the Convention.⁵⁸⁹ The collapse of the Convention, the arrest and subsequent transportation of the Scottish reformers, vilification by the ultra-loyalists, and the hardships caused by the war all served to stiffen the resolve of the S.S.C.I. to continue their work to achieve reform. There is also evidence to indicate that it was at this time that the aims of the Society became more radical and, significantly, it also started to use a new name: The Friends of Freedom and Parliamentary Reform.⁵⁹⁰ It was at an open-air meeting of this group in December 1793 that, for the first time, a resolution calling for universal manhood suffrage and annual parliaments was overwhelmingly adopted.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, October 18th 1793.

⁵⁸⁸ Taylor, 'The Sheffield Constitutional Society', p. 137.

⁵⁸⁹ Goodwin, *Friends*, p. 304.

⁵⁹⁰ NA/TS11/956/3561, interview of William Broomhead and William Camage before Sir Richard Ford, June 23rd 1794, quoted in Baxter, 'Origins of the Social War', p. 126; *Sheffield Register*, December 20th 1793.

⁵⁹¹ *Sheffield Register*, December 20th 1793. This meeting was chaired by William Broomhead, a founder member of the S.S.C.I., who had been expelled for advocating physical force in 1792 but who had been readmitted in 1793. NA/TS11/956/3561.

On February 28th 1794, the day decreed by the Government as a Day of National Fasting, the S.S.C.I., in the guise of the Friends of Peace and Reform, held a public meeting on West Street which was reputedly attended by 5,000 people. Following a lecture by Edward Oakes, a scissormith and a Methodist class leader, and the singing of a hymn that had been specifically composed for the occasion, a series of resolutions were agreed condemning the war and the Government for using Hessian troops and barracks to suppress English liberties, and reiterating their determination to fight for parliamentary reform. They resolved

That, therefore, the People have no remedy for their grievances, but a REFORM IN PARLIAMENT - a measure which we determine never to relinquish, though we follow our brethren in the same glorious cause to BOTANY BAY.⁵⁹²

The brethren referred to were the Scottish reformers, Muir, Palmer, Skirving and Margarot, who, a few days later, were sent a letter of support by 'The Patriots of Sheffield'.⁵⁹³

On Monday April 7th 1794, between ten and twelve thousand people attended a public meeting on Castle Hill.⁵⁹⁴ They resolved to petition the King on the

⁵⁹² *Sheffield Register*, March 7th 1794; *Hog's Wash, or Politics for the People*, pt. II, no. 8, March 1794, quoted in Stevenson, *Artisans*, p. 64.

⁵⁹³ *Sheffield Register*, March 14th 1794.

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, April 4th and 11th 1794.

behalf of the Scottish reformers and then they listened to a two hour speech by the brilliant firebrand orator, Henry ‘Redhead’ Yorke’. Yorke, a radical reformer who claimed that he had been educated under the patronage of Edmund Burke, had first visited Sheffield in late 1792 when, according to Mrs Gales, ‘every one was fascinated with him’ - in fact, she herself recalled the visit with the comment that ‘a new meteor [had] flamed on the political horizon in the person of Henry C. Redhead Yorke’.⁵⁹⁵ After his speech, the motion was put that parliament should once again be petitioned for reform, but this was greeted with such apathy that no-one would second it and, in all probability, this is what the organisers had hoped would happen. Yorke spoke again, urging his listeners to teach their children and the whole country to respect themselves, to do unto others as they would be done by and he concluded

When such a revolution of sentiment, shall have dispersed the mists of prejudice; when by the incessant thunderings from the press, the meanest cottager of our country shall be enlightened, and the sun of Reason shall shine in its fullest meridian over us: then the commanding voice of the whole people shall *recommend* the Five Hundred and fifty-eight Gentlemen in St Stephen’s Chapel, to go about their business.⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁹⁵ Gales, ‘Recollections’, pp. 34 and 49.

⁵⁹⁶ *Proceedings of the Public Meeting held at Sheffield, in the Open Air, on the seventh of April 1794*, quoted in Stevenson, *Artisans*, p. 67.

The meeting concluded with the acceptance of a series of resolutions declaring that taxation without representation was tyranny, that the only basis for a true government was one that represented all of the people, that universal suffrage was a right, and that they would never again petition parliament for reform.⁵⁹⁷

These resolutions and particularly Yorke's closing remarks were perceived by some, not least the Government, to be a threat against the authority of parliament and even as a possible threat of revolution.

A few weeks later, following a mass meeting that had been organised by the London Corresponding Society at Chalk Farm on April 14th and a meeting of the Society for Constitutional Information on May 3rd at which plans were discussed for an English Convention, the Government decided to act. On May 12th, Thomas Hardy of the London Corresponding Society, together with other London reformers, was arrested. On May 17th, the government appointed Committee of Secrecy reported that there was evidence of plans to arm by the S.S.C.I. A letter had been discovered in Hardy's possession from Richard Davison, a journeyman printer in Gales' shop, offering to provide pikes: 'A Plan has been hit upon; and if encouraged sufficiently will, no Doubt, have the Effect of furnishing a Quantity of Pikes to the Patriots; great enough to make them formidable'.⁵⁹⁸

⁵⁹⁷ *Sheffield Register*, April 11th 1794.

⁵⁹⁸ NA/ TS24/1/5, Second Report of the Committee of Secrecy.

Twelve days later, seven members of the S.S.C.I. were also arrested, five of whom were subsequently taken to London: William Broomhead, William Camage, Robert Moody, George Widdison and Henry Hill.⁵⁹⁹ Hill had previously been a prominent activist in the Freeman's Campaign. Further arrests followed in mid-June and, at the end of the month, a warrant was issued for the arrest of Joseph Gales on a charge of high treason. He was able to flee the country, first to Germany and then to America.

The Sheffield Five were all called to give evidence at the trial of Thomas Hardy, as were four other Sheffield men: William Dewes, a razorsmith; David Martin, an engraver and Gales' former partner; Edward Oakes, who had spoken at the Fast Day Meeting; and Edward Smith, who had been involved in the Freeman's Campaign from its earliest days. They confirmed that pikes had been made but said that they had been for the personal protection of members of the S.S.C.I. – in the light of the attack upon Joseph Gales' home a year earlier this would seem to have been a reasonable defence. Smith, in fact, told the court that if they had wanted, the cutlers of Sheffield could have made 10,000 pikes in one day, but they had not and their intentions had always been peaceful.⁶⁰⁰

Despite Hardy's acquittal, the Five remained in custody until December when they were released, having agreed to turn King's Evidence at Yorke's trial.

They returned to a hero's welcome in Sheffield on December 15th 1794.⁶⁰¹

⁵⁹⁹ Sheffield Archives, WWM, F64/37; *Sheffield Register*, May 30th 1794.

⁶⁰⁰ Wharam, *Treason Trials*, pp. 143-175.

⁶⁰¹ *Sheffield Iris*, December 19th 1794.

Yorke's trial took place in York in July 1795. Under cross-examination, Henry Hill admitted that he had made between 120 and 130 pike blades but insisted that they had been for the protection of the members of the S.S.C.I. He also admitted that the iron for these blades had been supplied by Enoch Trickett.⁶⁰²

The arrests, the trials, the exile of Gales, a series of petty prosecutions (including the arrest and imprisonment of Gales' successor, James Montgomery) and the profoundly anti-radical atmosphere in the country at large all combined to force the reformers in Sheffield underground, but they did not go away. Some concentrated their energy on the trade societies, the embryonic trade unions. There was a co-ordinated strike by journeymen in numerous branches of the cutlery trades in the spring of 1796, for example, which was eventually thwarted by a combination of master manufacturers. Fourteen years later, the Vicar of Sheffield, Thomas Sutton, told the Revd. Stuart Corbett that the workmen in the town were well organised in associations and were combining to fight for higher wages. He also told him that the slogan 'Cutlers stand true' was regularly painted on walls.⁶⁰³ Others turned to the chapel, especially after Alexander Kilham, founder of the Methodist New Connexion - the 'Tom Paine Methodists' - took over the ministry of Bryant's Scotland Street chapel in 1797. Some turned to more radical, and even revolutionary, societies. In fact, there is compelling evidence to show a continuation of personnel in

⁶⁰² NA/ KB33/6/5, the trial of Henry Yorke.

⁶⁰³ Thomas Sutton to Revd. Stuart Corbett, April 1810, quoted in A. Aspinall, *The Early English Trade Unions* (London, 1949), p. 112.

these organisations for at least the next forty years – John Crome and William Camage, for example, were members of the United Englishmen (1797-1803) as were William Wostenholme and his son, James. The Wostenholmes were also involved with the Sheffield Union Society (1816-20) and the Sheffield Working Men's Association (1837-40) and, following his arrest for engaging in seditious activity in 1817, William claimed that he had been involved 'in the cause' for twenty-eight years, which, if true, would suggest that he may also have been involved with the Freeman's Campaign.⁶⁰⁴

The spirits of reform and radicalism that had been awakened in Sheffield in April 1784, that had inspired 1,862 cutlers to petition Parliament for reform of the Cutlers' Company in 1785 and 5,000 Sheffielders to petition Parliament for electoral reform in 1793, that had inspired men like Edward Smith and Enoch Trickett to become leaders of both the Freeman's Campaign and the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information, were not diminished but would continue to flourish in the town for generations to come.

⁶⁰⁴ John Baxter, 'Autobiographical notes on leaders and activists in the Sheffield Working Class Movements', *Holberry Society Bulletin*, no. 2, February 1979, p.3; Baxter and Donnelly, 'The Revolutionary 'Underground'', pp. 124-132, p. 131.

CONCLUSION

The significance of the Freeman's decision to challenge the Cutlers' Company through the courts in 1784 cannot be overstated. It was the first time that they had united as a body, across all of the trades – trades that, for centuries, had retained a strong sense of craft identity and separateness – and it was also the first time that they had independently challenged the actions of the Company. For generations, the Company's authority over the trades had been accepted without question. The rules that it enforced were perceived to be 'auncyants customes' designed to benefit the majority by maintaining economic stability and by giving all an equal opportunity to succeed, and there was widespread ignorance of the fact that the Company had only been established in 1624 – most believed that it had governed the Hallamshire cutlery trades for time immemorial.⁶⁰⁵ The Freeman's motivation for this bold and radical action was economic distress.

The cutlery trades had dominated Sheffield, both economically and socially, for centuries and for centuries the transition from journeyman to master had been a realistic expectation for the majority. But by the second half of the eighteenth century the situation had begun to change dramatically. Increased consumer demand and technological innovations had encouraged specialisation and

⁶⁰⁵ 'Proceedings of the Court with a View of Frank Pledge of the most noble George, Earl of Salop, 1564-1565'. British Museum. Add. Charters 7.210 (copy in the possession of the Cutlers' Company).

diversification both within the local cutlery trades and also into 'new' metal industries, industries that were not subject to the Cutlers' Company's authority. Economic growth had also encouraged significant improvements to be made to the local transport and communications networks which, in turn, had stimulated further growth and which had also helped to reduce Sheffield's geographical isolation. More significantly, these improvements combined with increased consumer demand had encouraged some cutlers to increase their output, which most did by sub-contracting to others rather than by increasing their own production capacity. The emergence of these locally based entrepreneurs (master manufacturers) had a dramatic impact on the internal dynamics of both the cutlery trades and the community at large. As the wealth and influence of these men grew, they, rather than out-of-town merchants, began to dominate the cutlery industry's supply and distribution chains and the local credit networks. Consequently, it became more and more difficult for other cutlers to become masters and, as a result, there was a significant increase in the number of life-long journeymen.

Although the wealth of the cutlery master manufacturers rarely matched that of the wool merchants in the Leeds and Wakefield area or the cotton merchants across the Pennines in Manchester, they were, nevertheless, Sheffield's *nouveau riche* and as such formed a new and distinct socio-economic group within the town's social hierarchy. They adopted the dress and style of those who they now considered to be their social peers – gentlemen and merchants –

and sought to distance themselves from the common pursuits of the 'ordinary' cutlers. This, combined with their increasing use of middlemen, served to distance them from the majority of the workforce – a situation that encouraged misunderstanding, suspicion and resentment.

The master manufacturers were, of course, not the only ones to benefit from increased consumer demand for cutlery: when trade was good, there was no shortage of work and wages were comparatively high. But when trading conditions were not good, as happened during the war with the American colonies, the vulnerability of the contracted cutlers became apparent. Their resentment about their precarious economic situation was further exacerbated by the fact that the men who wielded power over them were, in many cases, from local families who only a generation or two earlier would have been the economic equals of those who they now employed. Many also believed that these men had succeeded by unfair means, namely by breaking the Cutlers' Company's rules.

The Freemen who attended Arthur Jewitt's meeting in April 1784 did so because they wanted the Company to redress their economic grievances. They believed that this could only be done if the Company reinforced its rules and re-established what was commonly accepted to be the *status quo*. This was their only aim. A minority, including Arthur Jewitt, *may* have been influenced, or emboldened, to take action by popular debates about rights and liberties that

developed in the wake of both the American war and the national campaign for electoral reform, but there is no evidence to suggest that they had any ambitions to change the way in which the Company was chosen. The majority of cutlers did not relate these debates to their own particular circumstances – they just wanted the Company to govern the trades in the traditional manner.

Over the following four years, the Freeman coalesced as a body. They formed committees, organised meetings, collected subscriptions, elected representatives to act on their behalf, published handbills, drew up petitions, appointed lawyers and barristers, and even gave evidence before the Court of King's Bench. But through it all their ambition remained the same: to persuade, or force, the Cutlers' Company to redress their economic grievances by enforcing its existing rules and regulations. It was only when it became clear that this could or would not be done that disillusionment set in, and in such circumstances it became relatively easy for the voices of those who offered an alternative, and more radical, solution to be heard. Encouraged by men like Enoch Trickett, Edward Smith, Benjamin Damm, Joseph Gales and the Dissenting ministers John Dickinson and Joseph Evans, the Freeman began to view their troubles in the context of the nation's troubles and to believe that the solution to both was the same: that they the governed should have the right both to choose and to cashier those by whom they were governed, namely the Members of the Cutlers' Company.

But at no point during the campaign did the Freemen ever publicly express a desire to have a voice in the election of those who governed their country. Whilst this may have been an ambition secretly entertained by some of the more radical element, particularly in the wake of events in France and the publication of the first part of Paine's *Rights of Man*, the majority were only interested in solving the crisis in their own backyard. They remained wedded to the belief that the Cutlers' Company, albeit a reformed Cutlers' Company, should govern the local cutlery trades, as it had done for generations. This is why they greeted the passing of the 1791 Act with joy. But when they realised, as they did very quickly, that their situation was in many ways worse than it had been before June 1791 and that the long-fought for Act had, in fact, weakened the Company's control, the voices of the radicals were listened to once again. They promoted the ideals advocated by Thomas Paine and argued that in order to achieve social and economic reform, there must first be political reform.

It is probable that a constitutional society would have been formed in Sheffield in the early 1790s notwithstanding the crisis in the local cutlery trades because, as we have seen, there were a number of political radicals in the town. But it is unlikely that such a society would have developed as the S.S.C.I. did or that it would have attracted thousands of members if the Freemen's campaign had not taken place. Through the campaign, thousands of workingmen – cutlers and non-cutlers alike – had learnt to put aside traditional trade barriers and to work together through democratically elected committees. More importantly, they

had become acutely aware of contemporary socio-economic and political debates and of how these debates related to their own situations. They had come to believe that as free men they had a right to be heard, a right to say how and by whom they were governed. Crucially, the campaign had also thrown up charismatic and, in many cases, radical leaders. There is clear and unequivocal evidence that many of these men went on to be leading figures in the S.S.C.I.

The story of the dispute within the Hallamshire cutlery trades not only explains why Sheffield's radicalism was so early and so strong but also demonstrates how, in the late eighteenth century, economic and political grievances were intimately connected. Although historians often treat them separately, they were in fact closely related in the lives of working men in Sheffield. I believe that a similar connection would be found if a serious study was undertaken of many of the other so far neglected provincial reform societies – in Derby, Leeds or Nottingham for example. If we are to understand popular political radicalism at this time, we must first understand the socio-economic context in which it arose.

APPENDIX A**The Freeman's Petition 1785**

(Source: CCA, S11/1)

TO THE HONOURABLE THE COMMONS OF GREAT BRITAIN

IN PARLIAMENT ASSEMBLED

The Humble petition of the Freeman and of those who are legally entitled to their Freedoms of the Company or Corporation of Cutlers in Hallamshire in the County of York, whose names are hereunto subscribed.

SHEWETH

That by an Act of Parliament passed in the twenty-first year of the Reign of His Late Majesty King James the first, entitled "An Act for the good order and government of the Makers of Knives, Sickles, Sheers, Scissors and other cutlery Wares in Hallamshire in the County of York and the Part near adjoining", it was amongst other things, enacted, That all persons using to make Knives, Blades, Scissors, Sheers, Sickles, Cutlery Wares, and all other wares and manufactures made and wrought of iron and steel dwelling and inhabiting within the said Lordship or Liberty of Hallamshire or within six miles compass of the same, should be from henceforth created made and erected into one Body Politic, perpetual and incorporate, of one Master, two Wardens, six Searchers, twenty-four Assistants and commonalty of the said Company of Cutlers of the Lordship of Hallamshire.

That by the said Act of Parliament the said Master, Wardens, Searchers and Assistants for the time being or the greater part of them were empowered to make Bye-Laws for the good order and government of the said Company and of all their apprentices and servants the same arts and Manufactures and to impose fines and amerciaments upon all those whom they should fine offending contrary there to. And such fines and amerciaments to levy and receive for the Relief and Benefit of the poor of the said Corporation.

That it was thereby further Enacted that no person using the occupation of a cutler, scissorsmith, sheersmith or sicklesmith, within the limits of the said Corporation should retain or keep in his service at one time more than one apprentice (besides his own son or sons) which had not served as an apprentices at the said trade for five years at the least, when it might be lawful for him to take another apprentice. Nor should he take an apprentice for a less term than seven years. Nor any whose term of apprenticeship should expire before he was twenty-one years old. And that if he assigned over an apprentice which he had taken to any other person he should not take another apprentice till that whom he had assigned should have served six years. Nor should he take any apprentice at all except he himself had been an apprentice at the same trade for seven years or been so long instructed therein by his father and should be Owner of his Work himself, and of full Age, on Pain of Forty Shillings a month to be levied employed and distributed as aforesaid.

That it was thereby further Enacted that no person using the said Mystery or Craft or any of them within the limits of the same Corporation, should strike grave or use upon his Knives or Wares any more Marks than one, and that to be such as should be first assigned unto him by the Master Wardens Searchers and Assistants of the said Company for the time being or the greater Number of them; on Pain to forfeit and lose for every time that he should so offend, all such goods not so marked and the sum of forty Shillings to be employed as aforesaid, and by the said Act of Parliament doth amongst other things more fully appear.

That since the passing of the said Act of Parliament and in pursuance of the Powers thereby granted divers good and wholesome Bye-Laws have from time to time been made and established by the Master, Wardens, Searchers and Assistants of the said Company for the time being for the better regulation of the said trade, and amongst others, it was ordered, That all persons of the said Company who made or caused to be made any blades, or ground or glazed any Knives or Blades or did any work whatsoever within the Liberty. belonging to any of the said trades, for any person that had not served an apprenticeship therein for seven years or should furnish him with any tools instruments or other things for setting up, using or exercising any of the said trades within the said liberty should for every offence forfeit forty shillings. That none of the said Company should buy any Wooden or other Haftes ready made of any person that had not served an apprenticeship, or directly or indirectly agree with any such

person to put him any blades into such Hafts, under the like penalty. And that all persons who should do any manner of work whatsoever, belonging to any of the said trades for any other person not free of the same Company should forfeit the like sum. Which said Bye-Laws were examined and approved by the Justices of the Assize in their Circuit according to Law above one hundred years ago.

That under and by virtue of the said Act of Parliament the trades thereby incorporated have ever since continued to increase in a very great Degree in so much as it is computed that there were before the late Disserverance of America from Great Britain, upwards of ten thousand masters, journeymen and apprentices employed in the said trades; Seven thousand of whom were Freemen or entitled to their Freedoms of the said Company.

That there are computed to be about [*blank in the original*] hundred master cutlers etc; who carry on business for themselves, and above [*blank in the original*] thousand journeymen who not having Capitals sufficient to carry on trade on their own accounts, are employed in different Branches of the said trades to work for such masters.

That several of the most opulent of the said masters have lately made a practise of striking upon their Wares the mark of any person whose goods were in the best Estimation, to the great Detriment of the fair Traders; of retaining a great number of apprentices and of employing many persons in various Branches of

the said Trades who have not been apprentices at all, or who have been apprentices to other trades; contrary to the express provision of the said Act and Byelaws. Because to apprentices they pay no Wages, and to those brought up to other trades or to no trades at all, lower wages than they usually pay to journeymen freemen, who have been brought up to and served regular apprenticeships to such trades, and are consequently better workmen; whereby many poor journeymen are deprived of work and the means of providing for their families, or reduced to the Necessity of working for such Wages as the Masters give to their Labourers; many unmerchantable Wares are made and vended; the trades are getting into disrepute, both at home and abroad; and industry and genius are discouraged to serve the selfish Views of a few wealthy Individuals, who are thereby endeavouring to keep the trade in their own Hands.

That after repeated peaceable but fruitless Applications to the Governors of the said Company for redress of these grievances some of your petitioners, the last Easter Term, applied to the Court of King's Bench for a Rule for the then Master, Wardens, Searchers and Assistants of the said Company to shew Cause why an Information should not be granted against them for not carrying the said Act of Parliament and Byelaws into execution; and upon Cause being shown the Court of King's Bench made the Rule Absolute for an Information to go, and subpoenas to answer such information were soon afterwards served upon the said Master, Wardens, Searchers and Assistants or the greater number of them.

That in order to get rid of the consequences of such information, and to prevent, as your petitioners have great reason to believe, any enquiry being made into the expenditure of the money belonging to the poor of the said Company, of which no account has of late years been given the said Master, Wardens, Searchers and Assistants together with some of the opulent Master Cutlers and such journeymen and others as they have Influence over give out that they intend to petition this honourable House for leave to bring in a Bill to alter and explain the said Act of Parliament.

That your petitioners are apprehensive the said intended Bill will be detrimental to the Cutlery Trade in general and to the town and neighbourhood of Sheffield in particular.

And therefore most humbly pray that they may be heard by themselves and counsel, at the Bar of this honourable House, against the said intended Bill passing into law.

Or that your petitioners may have such other relief on the Premises as to the Wisdom of this Honourable House shall seem meet.

APPENDIX B**Stevens' and Lastley's Execution****by****Joseph Mather**

[Source: *The Songs of Joseph Mather*, ed. John Wilson (Sheffield, 1862).
pp.21-2.]

O Wharton, thou villain, most base,
Thy name must eternally rot;
Poor Stevens and Lastley's sad case
For ever thy conscience will blot.
Those victims, thou wickedly sold,
And into eternity hurl'd,
For lucre of soul sinking gold,
To set thee on foot in the world.

Thy house is a desolate place,
Reduc'd to a shell by the crowd,
Destruction pursues thee apace,
While innocent blood cries aloud.

Poor Booth in strong fetters thou' st left
Appointed for Botany Bay,
He is of all comforts bereft,
To die by a hair's breadth each day.

Depend on't thou never can'st thrive,
Thy sin will e'er long find thee out,
If not whilst thy body's alive,
It will after death, without doubt.
When Stevens and Lastley appear,
Requiring their blood at thy hands,
Tormenting a million of years,
Can't satisfy justice's demands.

Some others were equally vile,
To prompt thee to this wicked work;
In order to share of the spoil,
Thou got by the blood spilt at York.
All are equally guilty with thee,
And as a reward for their pains,
They ought to be hung on a tree,
And then be suspended in chains.

APPENDIX C**Hallamshire Haman****By****Joseph Mather**

[Source: *The Songs of Joseph Mather*, ed. John Wilson (Sheffield, 1862), pp. 31-2.]

[This song is based on the story told in the Book of Esther – ‘And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance to him, Haman was filled with fury. But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus’ (Esther 3:5-6). Mather was remarkably well acquainted with biblical stories, especially those in the Old Testament, and the fact that he often alluded to them in his songs would indicate that they were also well known by the people of Sheffield. ‘Hallamshire’s King’ was the Master Cutler.]

When Ahasuerus o’er Persia did reign,
 Vile Haman by plots did much treasure obtain,
 By fraudulent stratagems rose to be great,
 And caused himself to sit at the King’s gate.
 The offspring of Belial raised so high,
 Great homage demanded of all who pass’d by:
 But Mordecai, one of the seed of the Jews,

To honour proud Haman did ever refuse.

Chorus

Then Haman he vowed that all Israel should die;

And Mordecai hangt 'twixt the earth and the sky;

But though he on plunder and rapine was bent,

He never took discount at fifty per cent.

Then Haman sent forth that it was the king's word

For each tribe of Israel to die by the sword;

His breast that no mercy or clemency knew,

Thought he by their death all the Jews to subdue.

But 'Hallamshire Haman' proud infernal elf,

For cruelty equals Nero himself,

Who knew he must fail, should we rot in our graves,

He makes us pay discount for being his slaves.

This 'Hallamshire Haman' keeps blacks at command,

To spread his dire mandates throughout the whole land,

Together they meet and their malice combine

To form a most hellish, infernal design.

On malice, on mischief, and tyranny bent,

Five poor honest grinders to prison they sent;

Though nothing they had of these men to complain,
But not paying discount for wearing a chain.
He took a poor man to where justice is sold,
And mercy polluted for lucre and gold;
To ruin his family he was fully bent,
And fain he to Wakefield this man would have sent.
But while for revenge he thus cruelly sought,
In a snare of his own this proud Haman was caught;
He dare not face justice, lest she should ordain
That he should pay back all his discount again.

This 'Hallamshire Haman', proud infernal thing,
Expects the next year to be Hallamshire's King,
But proverbs assure us that those who would sip,
Shall find that much falls 'twixt the cup and the lip'.
So if his great master should send in the year,
And cite him at his dreadful court to appear,
In torments and flames he must certainly dwell.
And discount resound from the corners of hell.

APPENDIX D**To the Freemen of Hallamshire****1790**

[Source: Sheffield Local Studies Library, MP428M]

And now Fellow Freemen let us wish you Joy! After a long and dark Night, the Morning of your Hopes, the long wished for Morning appears. Do not suffer your Spirits to flag! You have fought with the Spirit of Britons, and now when Success awaits you, can you tamely give up the Prize? Will you act like Madmen, and trample that harvest under your Feet, for which you have so long and ardently laboured. No, we think better of you, and hope you will think better of yourselves. Scorn the Suggestion of artful Men, who under the Mask of Friendship only wish well to themselves. Judas mingled with, and was accounted a Disciple, but his only Aim was to carry the Scrip. BEWARE of insidious PRETENDERS, who would betray your Cause with a Kiss!

At length Men of Weight and Property have opened their Eyes to the Justice of your Cause. They have proposed Terms of Accommodation which no reasonable Minds can refuse. The House of Commons is a House of Understanding, and will not refuse that Justice which you have so long and loudly demanded. This is the Hour of Importance, this is the Time for which you have looked so long. Every Day is more precious than the Treasures of India; because no Treasures can purchase an Opportunity like this: For Shame then, for Shame, ye who rest indolent and supine! Money is wanted to complete

the Business, and a Shilling given to-Day, is worth more than a Pound if left till to-morrow. Yet a few Days and your Cause must be carried, or else given up for ever. O then ye old Men, embrace the precious Opportunity, and remember that every Penny you bestow will be valued more than a Pound in the Estimation of your Posterity! Ye of middle Age, who have been active in blowing Coals, now when the Iron is hot, how can you stand like Children and neglect the welding Heat! And ye in the Prime of Youth, whose Labour produces you Plenty, how can you place Money in a better Bank than where it will provide Comfort for your old Age? Men of every Description, hear us! When Mariners have long struggled with a Tempest, when every Arm is weary, and every Heart is in faint; yet if a favouring Gales arises, when the desired Haven is in sight, Hope rekindles in every Breast, and every Arm unites to push the Vessel into Port. Such is our Situation – We have long struggled with a Tempest, but now the Darkness breaks and a favouring Gale arises. Let us not neglect the Bounty of Providence! Or if we do, let us learn to bear the Yoke in Silence! Our Mouths will be closed for ever! – We must never more complain!

The Committee of Masters

APPENDIX E**Address from the Society for Constitutional Information in Sheffield,****to the Public****December 19th 1791**

[Source: Sheffield Archives, WWM, F44/31]

As the necessity of a REFORMATION, by the Revival of our ancient Priviledges in the Constitution of our Government, is so well known, and so generally allowed, we apprehend it unnecessary to make any apology for declaring, That a temperate and dispassionate enquiry into the evils of our Government, it is presumed, can be the only means of redressing our grievances; without having recourse to the least efforts of violence. To allay, therefore, the heat of Party, to prepare the PUBLIC MIND for deliberate Investigation, and to prove that our LIBERTIES may be renovated without the destruction of the Constitution, or personal sacrifice; it is the immediate purpose, endeavour and intent of this Society, for which the Patronage of all Parties is solicited. Desirous of preserving Peace, Order and Security, the Members of this Society confide on the intention of their Endeavours being honoured with the general approbation and encouragement of their Fellow Citizens. Conscious of the service their Example and Perseverance in so laudable an undertaking may produce; they are proud to avow, the following are the Primary objects on which their motives and Principles are founded.

FIRST. That as our Constitution was, from the earliest Periods, founded on Liberty, it should not be destroyed, as if it were the Government of Despotism.

SECONDLY. That all our Political Evils, arising from the Abuse of the Practice, and not from Defect of Principle, the Original Purity of its Spirit may be restored, without Violence to the Body.

THIRDLY. That as the corrupt State of the Representation, originates with all Parties, its ancient Purity is only to be revived by the unanimous and disinterested Efforts of every Rank and Degree in the Kingdom.

FOURTHLY. That as nothing but a Patriotic and disinterested Resolution in all, to recur to the First Principles of our Constitution, can restore us to the entire Possession of our Ancient Liberties, it is not the Fall of one Party, or the Rise of another, that should be the object of Public Pursuit.

And, FIFTHLY. That as the Restoration of our Liberties is equally due to all, no Difference of Opinion, Situation, or Circumstance, should prevent every Individual, peaceably uniting in the Attainment of this invaluable Blessing.

CONDITIONS for admitting Members into this society.

AGREED, That the following Protest, or Declaration shall be complied with, and acknowledged, as the Real Sentiments of each, and every Member of this Society, previous to their Admission, into any of our Meetings, or their acceptance of a Ticket.

DECLARATION

I Solemnly declare myself an Enemy of all Conspiracies, Tumults and Riotous proceedings, or maliciously surmising any attempt that tends to overturn, or any wise Injure or disturb the Peace of the People; or the Laws of this Realm: And that my only wish and design is, to concur in Sentiment with every peaceable and good Citizen of this Nation, in giving my voice for application to be made to Parliament, praying for a Speedy Reformation, and an equal Representation in the House of Commons.

December 19th 1791

Crome Printer

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