

## Articles – Lesson 1: The political system before 1832

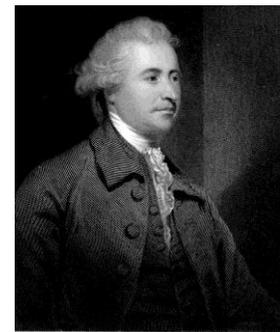
(Terms in ***bold italics*** are explained further in the Glossary, terms underlined have their own articles)

### Edmund Burke (MP biography)

1729-1797 Dublin, Ireland and Buckinghamshire

Edmund Burke was born in Dublin, but he moved to London as a young man to start a career as a writer or politician. He was soon known for his charm and personality. In 1765 he became an ***MP***.

Burke soon made alliances with leading ***Whig*** politicians, and was attracted to reforming causes. He attacked the British government during the ***American Revolution*** and strongly criticised the administration of India for its ***corruption***.



Edmund Burke  
After original by Joshua Reynolds

Yet Burke's career and political views were changed after the ***French Revolution*** in 1789. In France, people rose up against the ***autocratic*** rule of the king, Louis XVI, and demanded more political rights and a say in political decisions. Many people who supported reform in Britain initially welcomed the revolution, including Burke's political allies.

Burke himself was deeply worried by the ***French Revolution***. In 1790 he wrote a famous book, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which predicted that the ***revolution*** would soon become violent and chaotic. He criticised the revolutionaries for throwing out everything in the old system and 'mindlessly' starting again from scratch, based on theories, but not practice or history. Burke argued that the British system was much better because reform took place slowly, based on practical considerations and history. Burke's work was also an attack on reformers in Britain who wanted to change the system.

Many of Burke's old allies disagreed with him. The most famous response to his work was from the ***radical*** Thomas Paine. Paine had been involved in the ***American Revolution***, and wrote a book called *The Rights of Man*. He argued that everyone had political rights. The government should guarantee these rights for everyone, and if they did not, ***revolution*** was an acceptable way to get them.

Many people supported Paine and wanted to ***radically*** change the system. However, as the ***French Revolution*** became more violent, more people came to support Burke's ideas. They were afraid of the chaos a ***revolution*** could bring. In 1793, Britain declared war on France. This made those who supported reform even more dangerous to Parliament. The Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger, used ***repressive*** measures against pro-reform groups: he prevented them from meeting and publishing books and newspapers that put the case for reform. Many were arrested and Paine

himself was forced into exile. Those who had supported moderate reform before the French Revolution were also targeted.

Edmund Burke left Parliament in 1794 and died in 1797 after a long illness. His writings and ideas remain highly influential to this day.

? *Did you know?*

Burke is often known as the 'father of British conservatism' because of his writings.

### **Old Sarum (Constituency)**

Borough in Wiltshire, Parliamentary constituency since 1295, 2 MPs

Old Sarum was one of the most infamous **rotten boroughs** before 1832. A rotten borough was a place that had the right to send **MPs** to Parliament because it had been an important town in the past, but very few people still lived there. Often the land (and the rights to vote that went with this land) was bought by rich landowners who then chose their own MP.

Today, Parliament tries to keep the number of voters in each **constituency** roughly equal, and every so often revises the boundaries of constituencies to reflect changes in population. Yet in the early nineteenth century, this did not happen. With the growth of new towns thanks to the **Industrial Revolution**, the places that had **MPs** and the places where people lived were now very different. The new towns of Manchester and Birmingham did not elect their own MPs, but there were many **rotten boroughs** that did. There was lots of opportunity for rich landowners to have more influence over who was in Parliament.



*Old Sarum by John Constable*  
© Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Old Sarum is on a hill close to Salisbury, Wiltshire. It was the site of a Norman Castle and Salisbury Cathedral was supposed to have been built there. It was because of the Cathedral that the settlement was given the right to send two **MPs** to Parliament. However, in 1219 the Cathedral was moved to 'New Sarum' – Salisbury – closer to the River Avon. From then on Old Sarum went in to decline.

By the nineteenth century all that was left was ruins and trees. Although there were two **MPs**, no-one actually lived there! The people who owned the land also owned the right to vote for the MPs. In 1820 the land was bought by brothers Josiah du Pré and James Alexander, who made their money in India. They both immediately elected themselves to Parliament! Both consistently voted against reform.

Old Sarum was often mentioned in debates over the Reform Act as 'mounds', 'ditches' or 'ruins'. In 1831, the two brothers held their 'election' at 9am to avoid any trouble from protesters.

The constituency was abolished by the **1832 'Great' Reform Act**, and the Alexander brothers never sat in Parliament again.

? *Did you know?*

After the Old Sarum constituency was abolished, many reformers celebrated with funerals. The *Times* published a 'Lament to Old Sarum'.

### **Lancashire (Constituency)**

County, Parliamentary Constituency since 13<sup>th</sup> Century, 2 MPs

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century there were a number of new, growing towns in Lancashire, thanks to the **Industrial Revolution** and the growing cotton industry. However, many of these towns did not have their own **MP**, and were only represented in Parliament by two county MPs who sat for the whole county. The area now known as Greater Manchester had a population of around one million at this time but still did not have an MP.

Many middle and working class people in Manchester were upset by their lack of **representation** in Parliament. After the end of the **Napoleonic Wars** many of these people also faced economic problems. Food prices were being kept high by government measures, known as the **Corn Laws**, that prevented cheap corn from being imported in to Britain. Unemployment was high thanks to a slump in trade after the war and the return of former soldiers.

With no **welfare state** to support them, and no **MP** to argue for changes to the laws, many working people turned to **radical** protest. They formed reform organisations and published their ideas in local newspapers.

One of these societies, the Manchester Political Union, organised a pro-reform rally at St Peter's Fields, Manchester. They invited the famous Henry Hunt as the star speaker, and told those attending to be peaceful: they should not bring weapons or alcohol. Crowds of between 60,000 and 80,000 men, women and children, many dressed in their 'Sunday best', arrived to hear the speakers.

However, the size of the meetings caused the local authorities to panic. Before any speeches had taken place they decided to arrest the speakers and to remove the crowds. **Militia cavalrymen**, armed with sabres (swords), charged in to the crowds. The figures vary but at least 11 people died and between 400 and 600 were injured. Onlookers were horrified and the violence was widely reported across the country. Hunt and his fellow-speakers were arrested.

The event became known as the '**Peterloo massacre**', named after the 1815 Battle of Waterloo. Privately, even the **Tory** government thought the local authorities had acted stupidly. However, the events led to even more legislation against **radical** groups. The 'Six Acts' prevented radical groups meeting, imposed taxes on their newspapers and tightened rules on  **censorship**. Peterloo convinced many in the **Whig opposition** that Parliamentary reform was needed.

In the 1832 Great Reform Act, Manchester gained its first **MPs**.

? *Did you know?*

The Free Trade Hall now stands on the site of St Peter's Fields. For many years it was a concert hall, it is now a hotel.

### **Henry Hunt (MP biography)**

1773-1835, Wiltshire

Henry Hunt was one of the most famous early **radical** leaders. He was an athletic, handsome man, who later had a reputation for thinking a little too much of himself! Yet, he became a hero to many 19<sup>th</sup> century reformers because of his abilities as a great speaker and his commitment to non-violent reform.

Hunt was a 'gentleman farmer' from Wiltshire, and in his younger years he supported the government against reformers. However, his political views began to change after he was sent to prison in 1800. Hunt had volunteered for a local **militia**, yet he got in trouble for challenging his commanding officer to a duel! In prison, his politics became much more **radical**.

He soon gained a reputation as a fantastic speaker who could inspire and control a crowd. He stood for Parliament in Bristol in 1812. He was called the 'people's candidate', but he lost the election. Moving to London, he regularly spoke at **rallies** in the city. He favoured peaceful, **mass-petitioning** campaigns and worked against those who wanted to use violence to change the system. At a rally on 21 July 1819 in Smithfield, London, he stopped the crowd from becoming violent when one of the speakers was arrested.

This power over large crowds, despite his peaceful message, scared many in power. This was why the local authorities decided to arrest him at the '**Peterloo**' meeting in Manchester, Lancashire. Hunt first faced charges of high treason, but they were reduced. Despite an impressive and well-publicised defence, Hunt lost his case and was imprisoned for two years.

Hunt remained influential and popular. He was elected as **MP** for Preston in 1830. Yet despite making over 1000 speeches in Parliament he was much better at addressing crowds than he was as an MP! He had mixed feelings about the **1832 'Great' Reform Act**, believing that it did not go far enough. He lost his seat in 1832.

Hunt died in 1835, but his tactics of **mass-petitioning** and non-violent **rallies** were later taken up by many **Chartists**.

? *Did you know?*

Hunt lived a wilder lifestyle before his political career. He left his wife for his mistress, which was very unusual at the time – and greatly frowned upon!

## Additional Materials

### MPs Section Introduction

In this section you will learn about the **MPs** – the men who sat in Parliament – and how they shaped the different **Reform Acts**.

At the start of this period, many **MPs** were very wealthy landowners. You needed to be wealthy to become an MP – for a start, you were supposed to own a certain amount of property before you could even stand for election. MPs were not paid when they were in Parliament, so people who needed to work for a living could not become an MP.

Then, many elections were expensive. The rules about who could vote were different depending on where you lived. In many **constituencies**, to win you needed to **bribe** voters or offer them ‘treats’ – like alcohol – so they would vote for you! In some places the right to vote itself was tied to whether you owned land. Wealthy men could simply buy all the land in one of these **‘rotten boroughs’** and choose who the **MP** was themselves!

The changes that took place in this period not only gave more people the right to vote, but also changed how MPs were elected so there was less **corruption**. By the end of the nineteenth century, although MPs were not paid until 1911, there was less need to be rich to become an MP.

Many of the **MPs** discussed in this section supported reform – although some did not. Others felt that if they didn’t offer some changes then there would be a revolution, so it was best to pass some reforms to avoid this. They all had an impact on how the changes took place.

### Constituencies Section Introduction

In this section you will learn about events outside Parliament, that took place in the parliamentary **constituencies** around the country, that influenced **MPs**.

#### Political life before 1832

The **Industrial Revolution** had brought major changes to the country. As new industries and new work patterns grew up, new ‘middle’ and ‘working’ classes emerged. They also wanted their say in how the country was run. The only way they could get it was to convince the **MPs** to let them have a say. They did this through campaigning or protest.

At the start of this period, most people in power were wealthy landowners. They passed laws in Parliament that supported their own interests – such as the **Corn Laws** that prevented cheap corn from being imported in to Britain. This kept food prices high, so the landowners made lots of profit from their large farms. However, this was bad news for people who needed to buy food like bread to live, like those living in the towns, or those in the countryside who didn’t own land. The middle classes who owned factories in the towns were annoyed as they had to pay their workers higher wages so they



From Rowlandson's  
*'Sketches of the  
Lower Orders',  
London, 1820*

could buy expensive bread. It was much more serious for the poor – they struggled to be able to buy enough food!

These articles explain what ordinary people and groups did to try and influence Parliament to change the system. At the start of the period there were laws to stop political movements. Sometimes protest could be very dangerous! This meant that campaigners could be arrested, and in some cases violence was used to stop them. There were often splits between those in the protest movements who wanted to use violence to help make their point, and those who thought that peaceful methods, such as **mass petitioning** or **marching** would be more convincing.