

Briefly the unrest in britain 1815-21



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This period has been said to be the closest Britain has come to a revolution with the 17th century civil war. Lord Liverpool, the Tory government faced massive problems, most of these problems being inherited from his predecessors. Matters were made worse by the intensifying radical movement which was trying to win over the working class by use of radical press and open air meetings.

The agricultural and industrial revolution increased pressure on the government even more. Increasing population increased demand on the land. A massive agrarian change resulted in more efficient use of land, this meant that land that was previously 'common land' was now taken away from the poor, it also meant that they lost the right to collect their fuel from the land. The entire situation was worsened by the introduction of Game Laws in 1816. Alongside the agricultural changes was an even bigger industrial development. Demand to feed and clothe this rising population meant an inevitable change from domestic based industry to large scale urban industry. Urban growth and the Industrial revolution went hand in hand for example population increases in towns like Manchester went along with industrial developments in the region to feed and clothe the population.

The industrial revolution however, did not come without its consequences. Home based manufacture became factory based and new machines meant that not as many people were needed to produce the same amount of produce. Resent to this was shown in the Luddite riots. Luddites were a group opposed to the use of new machines in the factories. They developed as a movement 1811 - 1817 as a reaction to what they saw as a threat to

their livelihood. They believed that products produced in factories were inferior as they were not made by people with the proper skills.

The social consequences of industrialisation increased the ever-growing gap between rich and poor. This created a group of the working class to feel hatred towards the government. The rigour of factory work was also adding to the distress. Physical conditions were poor and long hours were enforced. The employment of young women and children denied legal protection and industry exploited this. The threat of imprisonment hung over anyone who refused rates of pay!

Making these socio-economic revolutions seem even worse was a rising population. But rather than the population change being the problem, it was the speed at which it was increasing. This acceleration was becoming the beginning of a destabilised society.

What did this rising population mean? The increased pressure on the land was too much for farmers to deal with, farming in the 19th century was not up to sustaining such a rapid population growth. The Speenhamland system, a system of poor relief set in 1795 that attempted to help the large numbers of unemployed, was put under strain. It was always assumed that payments were made on family size employers knew that they could underpay because the difference would be made up by the Speenhamland system.

The country had been at war for a quarter of a century which increased national debt around four times. Industry that had enjoyed a boom for so long had come to an inevitable stop and depression. Industrial and postwar circumstances made 'peace without plenty' so painful.

Rural crisis conditions had been developing since 1813. Wheat prices were at a low due to good harvest and imports. Money borrowed during the boom had to be paid back at this time of falling prices. The Corn Law in 1815 was supposed to help but this is debatable. Survivors of this agricultural crisis did so by reducing wages making economic conditions worse in an already economically unstable country. The government had to do something to do with the reduce in demand for products due to the end of the war! This and 400,000 soldiers needed to be accounted for as they returned from war.

A radical movement formed from people opposed to the government developed with ideas such as liberty, equality and brotherhood. They were demanding a more representative parliamentary system where the government would represent all the people. Annual elections ensuring MP's are working to the good of the country always. A secret ballot that would stop bribery and intimidation of people living on landowners land.

The radical movement was revived after 1815 because radicals had been deprived of displaying grievances in a lawful manner during wartime. The Radical message was spread in different ways such as radical press, political clubs and most importantly open - air meetings.

The first major open display of Radical discontent was the machine breaking Luddite riots made worse by the bad harvest. The Radicals open - air meetings as a form of protest was taken as a serious threat to the government following a series of three meetings at Spa Fields in London at the end of 1816. Following this the government passed the seditious meetings act banning all political gatherings March 1817. A small band of workers

planned a march from St Peter's field in Manchester to London to present their grievances to the Prince Regent. The march was peaceful and was in defiance of government legislation. The march ended when authorities in Stockport needlessly killed a protestor.