

What were the 1820 Radical Risings?

An Overview:
Your vote has a history.

An uprising of workers in Scotland's industrial belt calling for equality of rights and universal male suffrage



Why were workers so angry?

- Wages were decreasing and taxes on necessities were increasing (the infamous 'Corn Laws').
- There was widespread unemployment as soldiers returned from the Napoleonic wars and people migrated from the Highlands.
- Workers had no way of expressing their discontent as they had no vote and trade unions were banned.

How did the workers respond?

- Radical movements grew throughout the UK. Paisley's Radical Committee was possibly the strongest in Scotland.
- In July 1819 , 30,000 attended a radical meeting in Paisley, one of many held throughout the country

- In August 1819, 60,000 people attended a meeting in St Peter's Fields, Manchester in support of parliamentary reform and the repeal of the Corn laws.
- The military dispersed the meeting by force, resulting in the death of an estimated 18 people and injury to nearly 700.
- Newspaper headlines referred to it as the 'Peterloo massacre'.



- In September 1819, thousands gathered on Meikleriggs Moor, Paisley to protest the Peterloo massacre.
- Authorities deployed the military and read the Riot Act. The Act authorised local authorities to declare any group of 12 or more people to be unlawfully assembled and to disperse or face punitive action.
- Radical leaders were arrested.

Over the next few months:

- A Scottish radical newspaper was launched but suppressed after 11 issues and the editor sentenced to transportation.
- Large scale gatherings continued.
- The editor of Glasgow Herald, an anti-Radical, requested permission to establish his own Yeomanry.

Finally, on 1 April 1820:

An Address, signed by the 'Committee of Organisation for forming a Provisional Government', was posted in Glasgow, Dumbarton, Stirling, Renfrew, Lanark and Ayr counties.

Extracts from the Address

".....we are at length compelled from the extremity of our sufferings, and the contempt heaped upon our petitions for redress, to assert our rights at the hazard of our lives."

"Equality of rights (not of property)... Liberty or Death is our motto..... we earnestly request all to desist from their labour from and after this day, the first of April [until] in possession of those rights..."

Some historians have suggested that the Address may have been the work of Government spies in order to justify the forceful suppression of radicalism!

By 3 April almost all the labouring population had abandoned their work



- On 5 April , a small group of radicals, including John Baird and Andrew Hardie , weavers and former soldiers, marched on the Carron Iron Works, Falkirk to seize cannon.
- They were defeated by troops and arrested. The incident became known as the 'Battle of Bonnymuir'.

- On 6 April, a small group from Strathaven marched to Cathkin to meet up with a larger Radical force they believed to be there.
- James Wilson, a weaver and prominent Radical, was later identified as the leader and arrested.

How did the authorities respond?

- The Government fortified bridges over the Clyde with cannon.
- The wealthy moved what they could into the Royal Bank of Scotland vaults.
- The authorities sent troops to Paisley. During the following days these troops fired on the crowd and charge with fixed bayonets, killing two and wounding several.

- On 8 April, the Provost of Paisley asked troops to transfer five prominent Radical leaders to Greenock jail.
- Crowds gathered in Greenock after the troops left the jail. The troops fired, resulting in nine deaths , including an eight-year old child, and several wounded.
- The crowd made their way to Greenock jail, smashed in the wooden gates and released the five prisoners.

In July 1820, the trials for High Treason began. John Baird, Andrew Hardie and James Wilson were sentenced to death. Others were transported.



What happened next?

- The Radical movement was dealt a major blow but in 1832, an exposure of the 'spy' system operating in 1820 was published and those who had been transported were granted pardons.

The journey continues.....

- In 1832, the right to vote was extended from 5,000 to 60,000 men and in 1867 and 1884 was extended a little further.
- In 1918 it was extended to all men over 21 and women over 30 who met a property qualification.
- In 1928 women were given the vote on the same terms as men.
- In 1969 the voting age was reduced from 21 to 18.
- In the Scottish Independence Referendum 16 year olds were able to vote.....