

The Plug Riots

The Plug Riots as is generally known, originated in the belief of the Chartists leaders and their followers that but a voluntary and compulsory cessation of work for a given time throughout the country six weeks it is believed, was the limit fixed the Government would be compelled to concede the Charter and its six points. For a long time previously the Chartist party had been divided into moral and physical force sections the latter of which is responsible for the disturbances which brought the country to the very verge of revolution. In Rossendale and Bacup in 1842 it was known as the Plug Riots, owing to the mob stopping the work of the mills in the valley by taking possession of the premises and knocking out the boiler plugs, by which the water drowned out the fires and brought the work to a standstill. The mobs were organised on the principles adopted by the rioters of 1826, a crowd of strangers from where none knew well, suddenly made their appearance in the valley and as most of them were unknown they pursued their unlawful work almost with impunity and very few were prosecuted.

After the mills had all been brought to a standstill a company of soldiers arrived in Bacup from Burnley for the purpose of checking the disturbances. At the time the soldiers arrived the local Chartist leaders were holding a open air meeting in the quarry behind what was once the Co-operative stores and the Maden Baths. The soldiers were accompanied by the Magistrate of the time Mr James Whittaker, esq, of Broadclough Hall, who subsequently read the riot act and called upon the meeting to disperse. The only entrance to the quarry, where the meeting was being held was by a narrow passage between the houses in Rochdale Road, close to the premises once owned by the Liberal club and better known today as the old school clinic. After the mills had all been brought to a standstill a company of soldiers arrived in Bacup from Burnley for the purpose of checking the disturbances. At the time the soldiers arrived the local Chartist leaders were holding a open air meeting in the quarry behind what was once the Co-operative stores and the Maden Baths. The soldiers were accompanied by the Magistrate of the time Mr James Whittaker, esq, of Broadclough Hall, who subsequently read the riot act and called upon the meeting to disperse. The only entrance to the quarry, where the meeting was being held was by a narrow passage between the houses in Rochdale Road, close to the premises once owned by the Liberal club and better known today as the old school clinic.

The walls and housetops surrounding were crowded with persons listening to the speakers. The commanding officer, who seemed to take in the situation at a glance, refused to march his men through the narrow passage into the quarry where several thousands of persons were assembled listening to the speakers. Though his men had their bayonets fixed and their muskets loaded, he was afraid of sustaining loss by a volley of missiles from the adjacent rooftops upon which so many people were swarming. Accompanied by the magistrate he wheeled his men round and marched up Thorn Lane to the high ground overlooking the quarry, the site of the present Co-op houses but at that time a empty field. From this commanding position the soldiers overlooked the vast concourse of people on the low ground beneath and on the walls and roofs of the houses opposite. The speakers called upon the people gathered to stand firm and offer no resistance to the military. At this point the magistrate Mr

Whittaker mounted the wall overlooking the quarry in order to read the riot act. His foot slipping suddenly he disappeared in a somewhat undignified manner, to the huge delight of the crowd.

Securing a better footing he continued to read the riot act and called on the meeting to disperse. However the crowd counselled by the speakers refused and the meeting continued. The officer in charge of the military saw that the crowd was non violent and ordered his men to pile arms, and subsequently in a short time the crowd was fraternising with soldiers and supplying them with drink a turn affairs which seemed to be very welcome to the soldiers who had had a tough hot march from Burnley. Before the arrival of the soldiers a portion of the crowd had grabbed a man by the name of Henry Wolfenden, who it was alleged had made to order a large number of bludgeons to be used against the rioters. For some time he was rather roughly knocked about. He was afterwards placed in a cart, and with a large white cross painted on his back paraded up and down the principal streets and in the vicinity of the place of the meeting, the mob jeering and hooting furiously. He was eventually rescued by some of his friends.