

## Kildwick and Farnhill and the Chartist Movement

### Part 1 – 1815 to 1842

**Author's Note:** I used to hate history lessons at school. Thursday 10 o'clock, shut in an airless room, listening to some old duffer droning on about the Corn Laws, the 1832 Great Reform Act, and the European Revolutions of 1848, blah, blah, blah – almost as if he could remember them happening. It was enough to send a young lad to sleep. So, with that in mind, it is only right and proper that I warn potential readers of this piece that it has required this old duffer to include an awful lot of background history – including stuff about the Corn Laws, the Great Reform Act, and the European Revolutions of 1848 – in order to get the small, but interesting, local incidents (one in Kildwick in 1842 and the other in Farnhill in 1848) into some sort of context. I'm really sorry about that. Please try to stay awake.

To help you stay in the land of the conscious, this article has been split into two parts. The first describes events in Kildwick and Skipton surrounding the start of the Chartist Movement, up to 1842. Part two, takes the story on to 1848 and describes Farnhill's part in the "European year of revolutions".

### Kildwick – 1841

Have you ever wondered why parents call their children after celebrities? Do they ever think that the "cool" name they give their child at birth might not turn out to be such a great idea later on? Well, however unlikely it may seem and although you might imagine it to be a modern phenomenon, this practice was not unheard of in Victorian times.

In 1841, the Holmes family of Kildwick celebrated the birth of another son. The previous four had been called: James, William, Thomas and John. All good, solid, names, typical of the period; certainly nothing outlandish.

So what possessed them to call their fifth "Feargus O'Connor Holmes"?

Certainly any positive association which the Holmes family thought they were bestowing upon their young son had evaporated by the time he went to school. The schoolmaster found the young boy's name so offensive that he refused to utter it, and the child went through his school career known only as "F"<sup>1</sup>.

But why such antagonism, and who was Feargus O'Connor anyway?

It's time for a history lesson.

## England 1815 to 1832

The industrial revolution, which started in England around 1760, saw a rapid transition from a largely rural economy, based on agriculture and manual labour, to an increasingly urban economy based on machine-driven manufacturing. This change not only resulted in major movements of population away from the countryside and into towns and cities but also saw villages, such as Farnhill and Kildwick, change their natures and become small industrial outposts.

This mechanisation of work led to widespread poverty among the industrial working classes. In 1800 a hand-loom weaver could earn up to 30 shillings a week, easily enough to keep a small family; but by 1831 a loom operator in one of the new mechanical mills could expect to earn just 5/6d, barely enough to keep themselves fed and only just marginally above the amount which would have entitled them to Poor Relief<sup>2</sup>. The term “the bread line” originated in this period<sup>3</sup>.

Between 1815 and 1832 there were several periods of severe unemployment and famine amongst industrial workers, particularly in the north of England, which led many to embrace radical reform movements – both political and non-political. On August 16<sup>th</sup> 1819 one group, the Manchester Patriotic Union, organised a demonstration at St. Peter’s Field in Manchester<sup>4</sup>. It was attended by a crowd of over 60,000 people, who had gathered to demand the reform of parliamentary representation.

Shortly after the meeting began, local magistrates called on the military authorities to arrest the leaders, and disperse the crowd. This they did by means of a cavalry charge, with sabres drawn. By the end of the day, the “Peterloo Massacre” as it became known saw 15 people left dead on the field and over 600 injured.



Fig 1: The Peterloo commemorative plaque<sup>7</sup>



Fig 2: An original drawing of the Peterloo Massacre<sup>6</sup>

It took parliament a further 13 years to address the issue. But the 1832 Great Reform Act<sup>8</sup>, failed to provide a vote for everyone (or at least all adult males – no one was contemplating votes for women at this time) the Act restricted the vote to men who possessed property worth £10 or more, a substantial sum at the time, and far more than a working family could ever expect to possess.

## Chartist Movement - 1838 to 1842

By 1838, the working poor were no better off. They still had no say in government, and the 1832 Act had created a political middle-class: men of modest income and possessions who might be expected to support the establishment against any further extension of the franchise.

The Chartist Movement originated in 1838, when six Members of Parliament and six working men, including William Lovett (from the London Working Men's Association, set up in 1836), formed a committee, which published the *People's Charter*. The Charter listed the six main aims of the movement as<sup>9</sup>:

1. A vote for every man twenty-one years of age, of sound mind, and not undergoing punishment for crime.
2. The secret ballot. - To protect the elector in the exercise of his vote.

3. No property qualification for members of Parliament - thus enabling the constituencies to return the man of their choice, be he rich or poor.
4. Payment of members, thus enabling an honest tradesman, working man, or other person, to serve a constituency, when taken from his business to attend to the interests of the Country.
5. Equal sized constituencies, securing the same amount of representation for the same number of electors, instead of allowing small constituencies to swamp the votes of large ones.
6. Annual parliaments, thus presenting the most effectual check to bribery and intimidation, since though a constituency might be bought once in seven years (even with the ballot), no purse could buy a constituency (under a system of universal suffrage) in each ensuing twelve-month; and since members, when elected for a year only, would not be able to defy and betray their constituents.

All fairly reasonable, you might think.

The Moral Force behind the Chartist Movement was stated succinctly by William Lovett, who posed the question *"How, can a corrupt Government withstand an enlightened people ?"*

In June 1839 a petition in support of the People's Charter, signed by over 1.2 million people, was rejected by Parliament<sup>10</sup>. This led many in the Chartist movement to advocate the widespread use of force as a means of attaining their aims; these became known as Physical Force Chartists.

The Physical Force Chartists were largely working class, based in the north of England and in Wales – traditional industrial areas. Their leader was **Feargus O'Connor** who ran a radical newspaper, "The Northern Star", from offices in Leeds<sup>11</sup>. He was often referred to as the "Lion of Justice"<sup>21</sup>.

The threat of force was not an idle one. In January 1840 there were riots in Bradford and open drilling of men on Fairweather Green (now Thornton Road), and on January 27<sup>th</sup> there was an armed skirmish in the Green Market (later the site of the Arndale Centre)<sup>1</sup>. On the 29<sup>th</sup> a letter was sent from the court in Bingley to the Home Office, advising them of potential problems in Keighley where, they claimed, "about thirty among the labouring classes ... had been organised for some time as Chartist leaders ....". Apparently these people held secret meetings and were planning "some such violent demonstration" similar to that in Bradford. The magistrates asked for a military force to maintain law and order. The request was refused.

This is perhaps just as well, as on a Sunday morning later that year there was a rumour that more than 2000 rioters were approaching Keighley. The alarm bell was sounded and Special Constables left their church services and set off, along with a group of yeoman cavalry, towards Lees Moor (just off the Halifax road, between Keighley and Haworth). When they arrived they encountered not a group of Chartist agitators but a congregation of Primitive Methodists engaged in a camp meeting !





Fig 3: One of a number of satirical cartoons published by Punch magazine  
Thought to represent William Cuffay, arrested for sedition and transported to Tasmania in 1848 (see Part Two)

The division between Physical Force and the Moral Force Chartists, was not a rigid one. The Physical Force Chartists, although they always claimed that they would consider violence to achieve their aims, were by no means short-sighted and would use moral and social arguments if they served to further the cause.

For example, in Leeds in 1840 a “Total Abstinence Charter Association” was formed, and Chartists and teetotallers joined forces to run a Sunday school in Hunslett<sup>12</sup>, and in January 1842 a slate of Chartist candidates swept the board in the elections to become the wardens of Leeds Parish Church<sup>13</sup>.

In August 1841 **Feargus O’Connor** was released from prison in York Castle and the “uncaged lion” then took part in an extended tour of meetings, demonstrations, dinners and other gatherings throughout Yorkshire and Lancashire: the full list of appearances reading not unlike a modern-day tour schedule for a rock band.

The tour included, on November 6<sup>th</sup>, a meeting in Keighley<sup>22</sup>. Could it be that this meeting was attended by one or more members of the Holmes family and it was this that gave them the idea for the name of their fifth son? If so, they were not alone: around this period there were a number of children named after Chartist leaders, including one unfortunate girl who was given the name Feargus O’Connor Frost (John Frost being another leader of the movement).

O'Connor was a charismatic and yet complex man, and historians are divided in their opinions of him:

*Impressive of stature, with a gentlemanly appearance, a sonorous voice and an intuitive grasp of the sources of popular social protest endeared him to the masses ... there is no doubt that he was the most powerful and popular leader the British working class has ever possessed.*<sup>21</sup>

or

*A blathering, megalomaniac ... eccentric, crazy.*<sup>23</sup>

and

*... the best of a rather second-rate lot ... all things to all men ... As a political thinker O'Connor was quite negligible ... totally without originality ... His serious speeches were sometimes miracles of incoherence and absurdity ... all the instincts and certain of the qualities requisite for domination ... He succeeded in reducing the other Chartist leaders to the position of a "tail" ... conceited even to megalomania, ambitious, energetic, to a certain degree disinterested and insincere, an agitator and demagogue to his finger-tips.*<sup>24</sup>

In May 1842, a second national petition, this one with over three million signatures<sup>14</sup> (including 800 from Keighley<sup>15</sup>), was again rejected by Parliament: by a majority of 287 votes to 47. The Northern Star commented on this:

*Three and half millions have quietly, orderly, soberly, peaceably but firmly asked of their rulers to do justice; and their rulers have turned a deaf ear to that protest. Three and a half millions of people have asked permission to detail their wrongs, and enforce their claims for RIGHT, and the 'House' has resolved they should not be heard! Three and a half millions of the slave-class have holden out the olive branch of peace to the enfranchised and privileged classes and sought for a firm and compact union, on the principle of EQUALITY BEFORE THE LAW; and the enfranchised and privileged have refused to enter into a treaty! The same class is to be a slave class still. The mark and brand of inferiority is not to be removed. The assumption of inferiority is still to be maintained. The people are not to be free.*

## General Strike – 1842

Towards the end of 1841, the cotton industry entered a slump of unprecedented proportions. With unemployment rife, mill owners began to demand wage cuts. Once obtained, they came back for more.

By the summer of 1842 this unrest, together with the rejection of the second Chartist petition, led to a wave of strikes in which Chartist activists were at the forefront<sup>16</sup>. Workers went on strike, resolved to cease work until wages were increased and “until the People's Charter becomes the Law of the Land”. In some cases, strikers stopped production by removed the boiler plugs from the steam engines in the factories. As a result, these industrial disputes became known as the “Plug Plot”.

Surprising, given his role as leader of the Physical Force Chartists and his earlier article in the Northern Star, **Feargus O'Connor** refused to support strike action and, subsequently, the Northern Star would go so far as to claim that the strikes were the work of Anti Corn Law protesters.

The strikes spread from Lancashire into West Yorkshire from August 13<sup>th</sup> and trouble came to Skipton on the 16<sup>th</sup>.

## **Skipton – August 16<sup>th</sup> 1842**

August 16<sup>th</sup> 1842 dawned warm and sunny as 3000 men, women and children, the families of mill strikers in Colne, began to march towards Skipton<sup>18</sup>. Quite what their plan was, or if they even had a plan, is unclear but it does seem that they were intent in “turning out” the mills in Skipton and then perhaps continuing on to Addingham.

As they marched they intimidated the hand-loom weavers of Barnoldswick and Earby, demanding food and taking away their shuttles – thereby depriving them of the tools of their trade. One group later detached from the main body and went to Gargrave to stop the mills there, and the whole group then reformed to march into Skipton.

A number of eye-witness accounts exist of the marchers approach to Skipton along the Broughton Road. They were arranged four abreast and held staves horizontally, so as to form a solid body, with the march leaders identified by means of white armbands.

The Skipton magistrates had been warned in advance of the approach and a number of Special Constables had been sworn in. Nevertheless, it was certain from the outset that the 3000 strong body of marchers could not be prevented from entering Skipton (total population 5000) and doing whatever damage they wanted.

Two of the magistrates, Hastings Ingham and Thomas Birkbeck, rode to the edge of the town and spoke to one of the leaders, William Smith. Smith explained that their purpose was to stop the mills and, beyond that, they had no intention to do any harm to persons or property. Failing to be reassured by this, Ingham then rode on to Colne to request military assistance for the defence of the town.

Meantime, sections of the crowd began disabling the Skipton mills; beginning at Dewhursts (also known as Belle Vue Mill: now converted to flats, opposite Morrisons supermarket), then Sidgwick's Low Mill (in Sackville Street) and, finally, Sidgwick's High Mill (on Chapel Hill, near Skipton Woods). In all three cases they brought work to a halt by removing the boiler plugs.

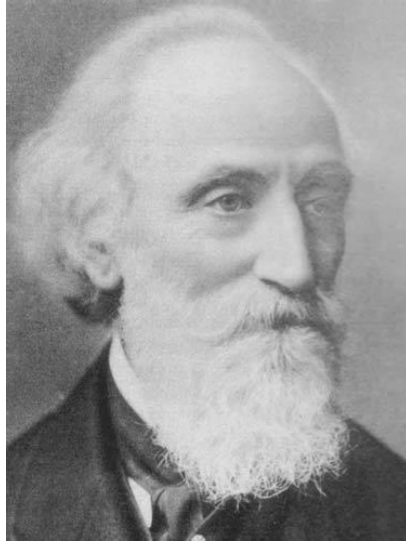


Fig 4: John Dewhurst, founder and owner of Belle Vue Mill

At High Mill there were altercations between the Skipton workers and the Colne invaders and, subsequently, William Smith, at the urging of his comrades, demanded money of the owner, threatening further damage if it was not forthcoming. Mr. Sidgwick promised him a sovereign if the crowd left the premises; the mill yard was then cleared.

Others went on the rampage through the town<sup>19</sup>:

*Meanwhile a perfect panic existed in Skipton. Business was entirely suspended; shops were shut, the windows of private houses were closed or blinds drawn, and the doors in many cases securely fastened. While a portion of the mob at once visited the mill of Mr. Dewhurst, the remainder went around the town levying black-mail everywhere. They entered shops and houses, and without resistance carried away the provisions that first met their eyes.*

As soon as the military arrived, a company of the 61<sup>st</sup> Regiment of Foot and a group from the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars, all under the command of Captain William Jones, the magistrate Matthew Wilson (who would later become Lord of the Manor of Kildwick) read the Riot Act to the crowd from the steps of the Town Hall in Sheep Street. The reading of Act requires all those gathered together to disperse or else face arrest.

Matthew Wilson's proclamation was universally ignored, at which point Hastings Ingham took it upon himself to ride around the town repeating the Act wherever the crowd had gathered.

Towards the end of the afternoon, with their purpose in the town complete, the marchers congregated in a field adjacent to the Carleton Road, called Anna Fields. Here, once again, Ingham read the Riot Act.: and once again the crowd did not disperse (did they perhaps think that they were about to disperse anyway, being gathered together in order to march back to Colne ?) and the magistrates ordered the troops to clear the field.

In this potentially dangerous situation, one of the magistrates, Cooper Preston of Flasby Hall, then shouted for the troops to fire on the crowd but they were called to order by Captain Jones, who nevertheless ordered his men to fix bayonets and charge. (Remember, this is just 23 years after Peterloo.)



The crowd spilled out of the field and on to the road, where they began to throw stones at the troops and magistrates as they retreated from the town. During the melee one of the magistrates, James Garforth, was hit in the face with a club; his spectacles were smashed, and he lost an eye and several teeth. Fortunately, this was the only serious injury in what became known as the “Anna Hills Fight”.

Six men were later arrested and tried in York. No evidence was offered against two of them, but the other four, including William Smith, were called to answer the charge that they had:

*“... at Skipton with force of arms, together with divers other evil-disposed persons, riotously and tumultuously assembled, to the terror of the Queen’s subjects.”*

The Northern Star reported that the result of the trial was never in doubt as the judge’s summing up was biased:

*“He went through the evidence and pointed out those points which were material against the prisoners. He had no doubt that the evidence fully bore out the offence with which the persons were charged. The court, he said, was deeply indebted to the Government for the leniency they had shown in not prosecuting them for high treason ...”*

All four men were found guilty. William Smith was sentenced to serve 12 months with hard labour; the rest, 6 months with hard labour.

**Note:** For his services on August 16<sup>th</sup> 1842, Captain Jones was later presented with a piece of silver plate by the citizens of Skipton<sup>20</sup>. Perhaps rightly so; it was only his action in controlling his troops that prevented a riot turning into the massacre so earnestly desired by some of the magistrates of the town.

**Note:** An article on the events of August 1842 was published in the Keighley News on February 24<sup>th</sup> 2022. This concentrates on the events in Keighley, although there is some mention of Skipton and Halifax. To see a scan of this article, [click here](#).

## Manchester – September 1842

The wave of strikes that followed the second Chartist petition was quickly suppressed. Without organised trade-unions able to provide financial and practical support, an indefinite stoppage could not be sustained.

The drift back to work began as early as August 19<sup>th</sup>. By the start of September, only workers in Lancashire and Cheshire were still on strike; and the last, the Manchester power-loom weavers, returned to work on September 26<sup>th</sup>.

During the course of the strike, over fifteen hundred people were arrested during the strikes, seventy-nine of whom were found guilty: many of these were sentenced to be transported to Australia. Several Chartist leaders, including **Feergus O'Connor**, were also detained<sup>17</sup>.

So the strike was over, as was the 1842 campaign for the People’s Charter. However, the underlying issues were not resolved (see [Appendix A](#)) and Chartism continued as a movement, albeit quietly, until circumstances on the Continent saw it come once again to the fore.

## What happened next ?

This is a story half-told.

If you'd like to know how the Chartist cause continued, how Farnhill played its part in the "European year of revolutions", and how Feargus O'Connor became a figure of ridicule, see Part Two of this article – coming soon to a Local History website near you.

## Appendix A – A mill girl's letter

An extract from *Industry and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century Keighley. The Bradford Antiquary, Vol. IX (old series) 1952.*

From the midst of the strike [of Keighley wool combers in 1846] one voice was raised which still commands attention. A poor factory girl wrote to Clough [the mill owner] what must be one of the most interesting letters in early nineteenth century history. Behind its obvious illiteracy there rings a note of dignity and distinction. It is worth while quoting in full:

Much respected Sir

I have not the pleasure of being personally acquainted with you nor at the same time ever had the opportunity of being in your company beyond that of being employed by you as a factory girl I have a high respect for you above that of any other Manufacturer although you have combined together to sink the poor man a step lower in the scale of Being than he was before I have not the presumption to dictate what you should do although if rightly considered by you it would lead to the conclusion of the strife which exists betwixt the Master and man to the evil of both, the rich are appointed by God to defend and protect the poor and how can they better do it than by employing them with labor and giving them a reasonable wage for that labour not by giving more than can be afforded that no reasonable person will agree with but at the same time the combers strike appears to be a reasonable thing as that body of work people are the most depressed no other trade has to labour so hard for the money they earn it has been the sorrow and grief of many that your firm was chosen for the strike as a large number of your combers had much respect for their Master although there are some who neither fear God nor regard man their always was some of the same sort and always will be, the innocent have most to suffer and theirs plenty of it to grapple with at this time owing to the Masters turning out all their combers not through bad trade but through malice to the poor some are aggravated to use bad language enough to make it, if true dangerous for the higher party to go alone in the dark others are sinking fast into poverty and ruin who will have to give an account of those things at the last day when the question is asked if ye have fed the hungry if ye have clothed the naked, there is such a bad feeling apparently existing that ought to be a matter of prayer for the people that profess religion it is my sincere prayer that almighty God would touch the hearts of those that have the power, that the beautiful passage in the Church service would be put in operation by those that have the means that it would please them to provide for the fatherless children and widow and all that are desolate and oppressed of which your servant is of that number you have already had the prayers of the poor that you might be blessed in your Basket and blessed in your store What then will be the blessing of those that were ready to perish by a little relenting on your part that will in no way effect your pocket what satisfaction their results from good actions much more when a whole town receives the benefit.

May the God of all grace keep and preserve you long on earth both as a Blessing and to be blessed in the prayer of the writer who is too poor to sign

her name.

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