

# THE CHARTIST MOVEMENT

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**Chartism was the first mass working class labour movement in the world.**

It began in the nineteenth century as a movement by working people to gain the right to vote. At this time very few men were entitled to vote, it is estimated less than one in seven men aged 21 or over could vote by the end of the 1830s. Chartism was a movement for working class people to aspire to a better life and it engaged families. Men and women attended meetings. Chartists often named their children after their heroes, with first and second names such as Henry Vincent, Feargus O'Connor and John Frost. Chartism lobbied for changes in the democratic system to allow more people to vote and it offered a social side with meetings, activities and discussions. It attracted millions of people.



Left to right; Henry Vincent, Feargus O'Connor and John Frost.

## **The Six Points OF THE PEOPLE'S CHARTER.**

1. A VOTE for every man twenty-one years of age, of sound mind, and not undergoing punishment for crime.
2. THE 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 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 twelvemonth; and since members, when elected for a year only, would not be able to defy and betray their constituents as now.

**The Chartists were known by their six point people's charter which not only included the right to vote for all men but also demanded:**

A secret ballot for voting; to end the intimidation and bribery that surrounded elections; an end to making property ownership a requirement to become a member of parliament; all members of parliament to be paid to allow working men to serve in parliament; all constituencies should be equal in population size; and elections to parliament should be held annually so that members of parliament would have to answer to their voters every year instead of seven.

There were many groups of Chartists around the country, including London, Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield. The manufacturing districts formed the backbone of the movement, often led by artisans such as the Sheffield cutlers.

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# CHARTIST WOMEN

## AND THE

# RIGHT TO VOTE

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**In the Chartist movement, there were discussions about whether they should lobby for women's rights to vote.**

In the 1840s some local groups asked for female suffrage to be included in the Charter. However, while many Chartists supported universal suffrage, the majority did not, for a variety of reasons. Most preferred to focus on men's rights first, in order to win the battle for suffrage, for fear of alienating potential supporters and also because of prejudice against women.

In 1851, eleven Sheffield women came together to form the Sheffield Women's Rights Association (also called the Sheffield Women's Radical Association), which asked for votes for women. This was the first time women had come together to claim these democratic rights for themselves. Abiah Higginbottom, Eliza Rooke, Ann Thornhill, Eliza Bartholomew, Mary Brooke, Mary Hutton, Mary Whaley, Kate Ash, Eliza Cavill, Ann Higginbottom and Henrietta Holmshaw were the founding members.

During this time Eliza Rooke received a letter from Anne Knight, a prominent campaigner for women's rights to vote, and a Quaker and slavery abolitionist. Eliza was one of seven names passed to Anne Knight by Isaac Ironside on the basis that these seven women had come to see him about the way he was voting as an elected member of Sheffield council. Anne Knight urged the Sheffield women to campaign for female suffrage. The group seems to have decided to campaign for female suffrage before they received the letter, nonetheless this added support gave impetus to further meetings. On 5 February, almost immediately after receiving Anne Knight's letter, a meeting was held to discuss voting rights for women.



69 year old Anne Knight, 1855. Library of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain.

# **TO THE WOMEN OF ENGLAND – BELOVED SISTERS –**

**We, the women of democracy of  
Sheffield, beg the indulgence of  
addressing you. We have found  
that we must organise independent  
of our brothers, and fight our  
own battle' ...**

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## **Launch of the Sheffield Women's Rights Association**

The first meeting of the Sheffield Women's Rights Association was held on the 26th of February 1851 at the Democratic Temperance Hotel, Queen Street in Sheffield. It opened with the words above and below.

*There are some who would say: "Would you have woman enjoy all the political rights of men?" To this we emphatically answer: Yes! for does she not toil early and late in the factory, and in every department of life subject to the despotism of men? and we ask in the name of justice, must we continue ever the silent and servile victims of this injustice? perform all the drudgery of his political societies and never possess a single political right? Is the oppression to last forever? We, the women of the democracy of Sheffield, answer, No!'*

Abiah Higginbottom, Chair of the Sheffield Women's Rights Association.

The Sheffield women, all of them Chartists, put together the first petition to Parliament, by a group of working women, on female suffrage. In addition to the right to vote, the Women's Rights Association also campaigned for the repeal of taxes on knowledge (newspapers and pamphlets which were taxed to prevent working people from buying them), campaigned for temperance, pacifism, internationalism and for the right for women to wear trousers.

To launch the campaign a soiree and a ball was held in the Hall of Science in Rockingham Street to celebrate. Soirees provided generous helpings of food, mostly sandwiches and cakes, but not alcohol. At the soiree, speeches were given on the enfranchisement of women including the position of Queen Victoria. If a woman could rule the country why couldn't she vote? A poem was read by Mary Hutton, a talented working class poet living in Sheffield, and then the ball opened and dancing began.

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# PETITIONS TO PARLIAMENT

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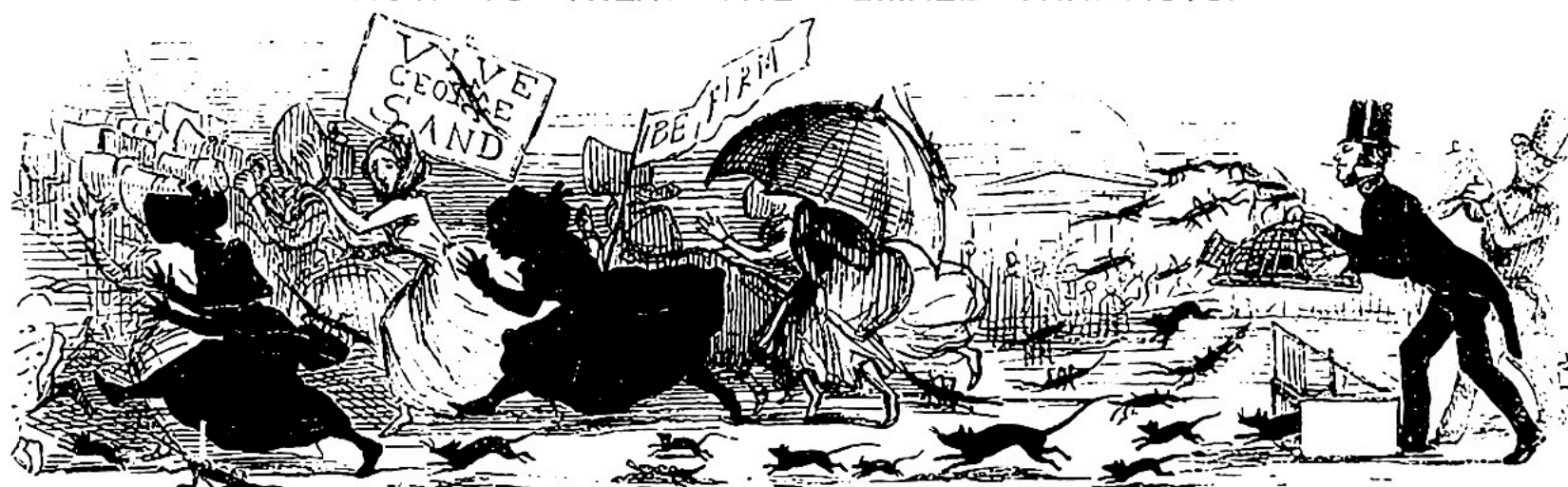
## **Chartist petitions to Parliament to allow men to vote had previously been unsuccessful.**

Chartist petitions to Parliament to allow men to vote had previously been unsuccessful. The first Chartist petition of 1839 was signed by 1.28 million people and was three miles long. Both men and women signed. The petitions presented to parliament were signed by 3 million people in 1842 and nearly 6 million in 1848.

Debates about allowing women to vote as well were not taken seriously and women were ridiculed and insulted by popular opinion, especially in the press. Nonetheless, John Parker MP for Sheffield presented the Chartist women's petition in the House of Commons on 18 June 1851 and the Earl of Carlisle presented it to the House of Lords. Unsurprisingly, the petition was defeated.

The Sheffield Women's Rights Association did not give up hope: they continued to lobby widely, writing to newspapers, attending meetings across the country and encouraging other towns to form their own women's suffrage groups. The fame of the Association must have been considerable - in a commentary in the London Globe in March 1851 there is a disparaging reference to the 'spirit of Sheffield gynaeocracy' and how it might affect a commission of inquiry into divorce law. In 1852 a National Women's Rights Association was established, with Anne Knight, as its president.

### **HOW TO TREAT THE FEMALE CHARTISTS.**



How to treat the female Chartists': rats and beetles. Source: Punch, 1st July 1848



# THE SHEFFIELD WOMEN

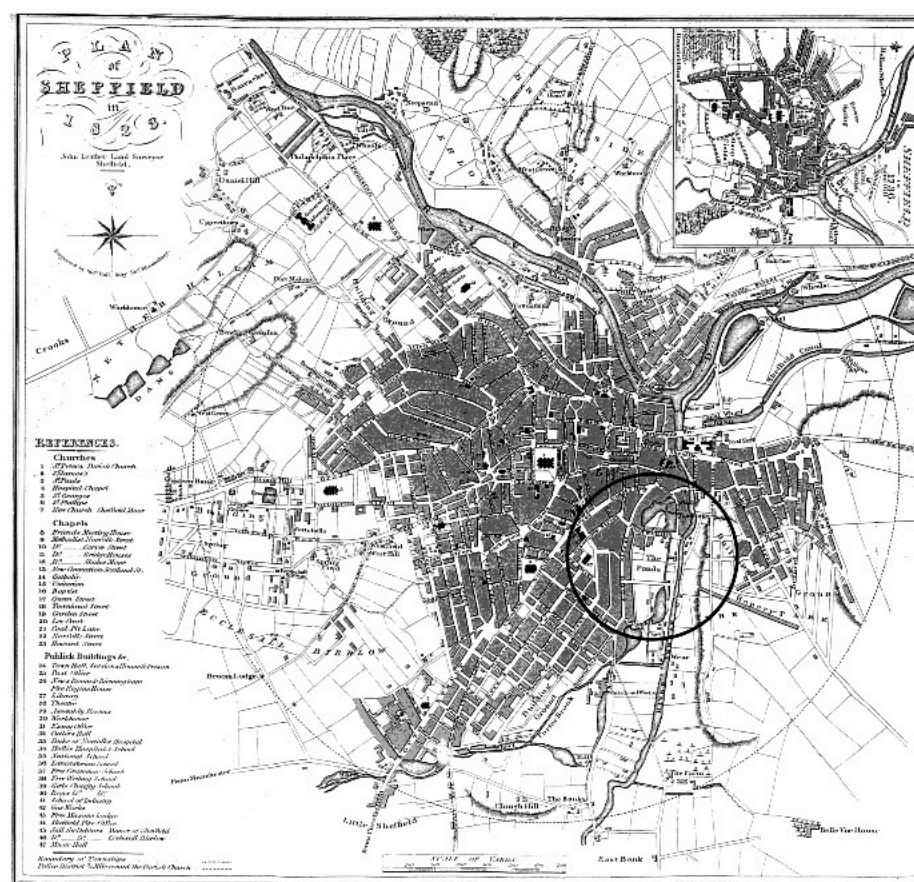
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## There were eleven founding members of the Sheffield Women's Rights Association.

They met weekly in 1851 which is likely to have cemented relationships and created a close knit group. Most of the women lived near to each other in the centre of Sheffield in the Pond Street area.

Little is known about them apart from their records in the births, marriages and deaths of the time. Abiah Higginbottom was Chair of the group and her name often appears in letters and other statements at the time. Abiah was born Abiah Jackson in Kippax in Yorkshire and was the daughter of a miller. She moved to Sheffield to marry Thomas Higginbottom who worked in the small metals trade. They married in Sheffield Cathedral in 1834. Abiah was a few years older than Thomas and they do not appear to have had any children. She died in 1859, aged just 49 and is buried in Doncaster Cemetery. Her sister-in-law, Ann was also a founder member of the group.

Another founding member was Eliza Cavill, whose husband was the landlord of the Democratic Temperance Hotel in Sheffield where many Chartists used to hold their meetings. The others were Eliza Rooke, Ann Thornhill, Eliza Bartholomew, Mary Brooke, Kate Ash, Henrietta Holmshaw, Mary Whaley and Mary Hutton, the poet, and her many poems survive. Eliza Rooke and Mary Whaley are buried in Sheffield General Cemetery.



Pond Street area of Sheffield (black circle) c. 1823.

# THE CHARTIST POET

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## **Mary Hutton was a more unusual member of the Sheffield Women's Rights Association.**

She spent most of her life in Sheffield, having married Michael, a penknife cutler who was twenty five years older than her and with two children from a previous marriage. Michael Hutton was in poor health and was to discover that he had been defrauded by the benefits society to which he had been paying contributions. By 1851 Mary was a widow and she died in 1859 aged 65.

Three collections of Mary's poetry were published and she has come to be recognised as a prominent poet of the Chartist movement. She wrote about the plight of the poor, living in terrible conditions: this was a situation which she experienced in her own life. But she also wrote about the death of the King, the marriage of the Queen, John Clare's ill health and her feelings about reading a book by Walter Scott. Her poems reveal the depth of her feelings about the injustices endured by the poor.

**No baneful workhouses were there;  
The rich were not alone protected;  
Nor yet the poor sold and dissected;  
No prisons for pale infancy.**

**The Happy Isle and Other Poems, 1836**

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**The husband, friend and father, day by day,  
Slowly yet swift approaches to decay,  
Wearing away in utter helplessness,  
And those who watch his couch no power to bless -  
No means to soothe a dying partner's woe,  
Tis what the affluent can never know;  
And never may they feel that burning throe -  
The bitterness of that wild wildering gale,  
When poverty and sickness both assail.**

**- Composed under Severe Affliction in Cottage Tales and  
Poems, 1842**

# SAMUEL AND MARY HOLBERRY

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**Samuel Holberry, died a martyr to the cause of democracy in 1842, aged 27.**

Samuel and his wife Mary were prominent campaigners for Chartism. Samuel was the son of an agricultural labourer and he moved to Sheffield to find work and here he met Mary. Samuel was described as strikingly tall, over 6 feet and with jet black hair. He was a leader of the Sheffield Chartists.

When the Chartist petitions, with millions of signatures, were rejected by Parliament, the Sheffield Chartists planned to seize public buildings. However, there was a traitor in the midst and Samuel and his wife were arrested. Mary, who was pregnant, was locked up but refused to betray her husband and was not charged. Samuel was sentenced to four years at Northallerton House of Correction and put to work on the treadmill. When he became gravely ill, he was moved to the prison hospital in York. Mary petitioned for his release and, when allowed, corresponded with him. Samuel did not want his wife to visit him, as he knew it would upset her.

*'My dear, you say you should like to come to York to see me; to that I cannot give my consent. In the first place we should have to look through the odious bars and it would only make you more unhappy'.*

Samuel died in the prison hospital in 1842. At his funeral, a large procession (estimates vary from 10,000-50,000), marched through the streets of Sheffield to the General Cemetery. Afterwards people were invited to a meeting that evening to *'demand an investigation into the death of Samuel Holberry and to ascertain whether the life of every poor man who opposed the existing government shall be at the disposal of the Secretary of State.'*

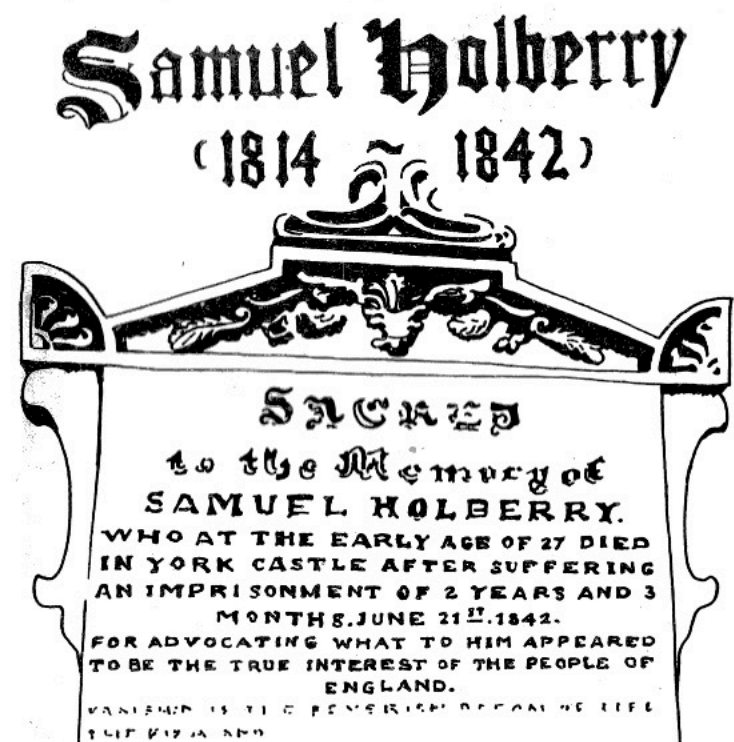


Illustration taken from the cover of *Samuel Holberry, 1814-1842*, Sheffield's Revolutionary Democrat Pamphlet – 1 Jan. 1978.

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# If a woman could rule the country why couldn't she vote?

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Many women belonged to the Chartist movement. Women attended Chartist rallies and mass meetings, organised their own meetings, and collected a lot of money for the movement. They spoke at meetings and argued for the implementation of the Charter which included the right of universal male suffrage.

There were numerous local Chartist associations specifically run by and for women to lobby for implementation of the Charter. Sheffield was home to one of the most active Chartist groups in the country. However, in common with the Chartist movement nationally, the Sheffield Chartist men did not petition for women's rights to vote. Nonetheless, a group of Sheffield Chartist women did campaign for their democratic right to vote and they succeeded in getting their petitions debated in parliament. The Sheffield Women's Rights Association did not appear to continue after 1853, but the fact of its existence up to this time helped to pave the way for women's suffrage.

They were ahead of their time and it would be many years and a different century before women gained the vote.

When women's suffrage was finally granted after the First World War, reference was made to the pioneering work by the Sheffield Chartist women who paved the way for the later Suffragette movement.

History records leaders and people who can afford to establish their legacy. The lives of ordinary women and men are seldom documented: no portraits are painted and rarely are photographs taken. Records are sparse. The struggle of these pioneering Sheffield working women deserves to be better known in the city, region and beyond.

This exhibition draws on research derived from newspapers, census forms, births, marriages and deaths records. More information about this research can be found in Roberts, Matthew (2021) 'Women and Late Chartism: women's rights in mid-Victorian England', *The English Historical Review* 136 (581), pp 913-949.