

Changing Birmingham - its people and places: Finding a Voice

By Jim Wells, Friends Trustee

*'Lo! We answer ; See! We come / Quick at freedom's holy call' **

From *'Hymn of the Union'*

Exploring the database of the Friends' acquisitions since 1931, which is now available on our website www.fbmt.org.uk, I have discovered some interesting acquisitions – including an impressive painting of a large public meeting in Birmingham. My quarterly article in 'Artefacts' seemed a good opportunity to investigate the story behind it!

In the latter half of the eighteenth-century, Birmingham was a rapidly growing town in terms of its population and its manufacturing. However, its political representation was through two Warwickshire MPs or local landowners, including the Dartmouth family. In the election of 1774, during the reign of George III, we can see the first rumblings of discontent with this state of affairs. On an extremely restricted electorate, those who were able to vote in Birmingham overwhelmingly backed a successful campaign by Sir Charles Holte of Aston, an independent candidate who would speak up for the perceived interests of Birmingham itself.

Shortly after the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 there was an economic depression and a number of trade recessions, which caused much distress in Birmingham and fuelled increasing frustration with the existing political system. There was little faith in a system which was based on a very limited electorate and in which Birmingham's ever-increasing population had to rely on Warwickshire MPs. There were many so-called 'rotten' boroughs where seats were effectively 'bought' with riotous polling days and lavish hospitality - some might say bribery. Into this situation came two influential figures: Thomas Attwood and George Edmonds. 'King Tom', as Attwood became known, came from a wealthy industrial family in Halesowen. Educated at Wolverhampton Grammar School, he became a banker based in Birmingham. Coming from a conventional political background he moved onto a radical political platform as a result of his economic proposals being rejected by the governing elite.

George Edmonds became involved in the campaign for political reform in 1812, and was imprisoned in Warwick Castle for 6 months. In 1830 he joined forces with Attwood in founding the Birmingham Political Union (BPU). Its first public meeting was held in January 1830 at the Beardsworth Repository, a horse dealers yard set between Moseley Street and Cheapside which was able to accommodate over 10,000 people.

Attwood's success as a public speaker, his willingness to organise a popular mass movement and his use of radical language to highlight common interests - *'If the masters flourish the men flourish with them'* - quickly made him a figure with a national profile. The BPU model was rapidly copied across the region and across the country, putting immense pressure on Parliament to bring forward legislation to reform the electoral system.



'Meeting of the Birmingham Political Union' by Benjamin Robert Haydon, 1832-33; 1937P370; Presented by the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, 1937; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0

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In 1832, legislation to introduce fairly modest changes – the Third Reform Bill – was blocked by the House of Lords. This brings us to the ‘Days of May’ and the subject of our painting, which depicts the 7th May rally – ‘the Gathering of the Unions’. Birmingham and the BPU were at the centre of the national campaign for the reform of Parliament, with the BPU being one of the principal organisations involved in the agitation. Numbers attending this rally were estimated to be up to 200,000 and 40 Unions were involved. The location was Newhall Hill, now part of the Jewellery Quarter, in what was then a naturally formed amphitheatre. It is still possible to walk up Newhall Hill Street and imagine the setting for this painting: the speakers, including Attwood and Edmonds, addressing this huge assembly with people from all over the region and banners flying. Many of the attendees would have set off early in the morning, travelling on foot from Coventry and Wolverhampton, and returning in the evening, demonstrating their commitment to the cause. The meeting commenced with the singing of the ‘Hymn of the Union’*, which would have echoed around this immense gathering and, such was the significance of the event, it was reported across Britain and continental Europe.

The legislation was finally passed later that year and, as a result, Birmingham received its first two MPs. Unsurprisingly Thomas Attwood was elected unopposed, as was Joshua Scholefield, but George Edmonds’ candidature was not supported. Despite the achievements, disillusionment and frustration quickly set in, both amongst the campaigners and Attwood himself who felt isolated in Parliament as he was not part of the major political groupings. The result was a new more militant movement called Chartism, based on the six demands of the People’s Charter, including universal male suffrage and the vote by secret ballot, which initially the BPU cooperated with. This resulted in Attwood’s last major political act, presenting the Chartist petition to Parliament in 1838, which was soundly rejected. You can, of course, sit with Attwood on the steps of Chamberlain Square and

discuss the events of the 1830s as his modern statue reposes in this location.



‘Suffragist Banner - West Midland Federation’, 1912; 1981F15; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0

The first half of the nineteenth century had focussed on male universal suffrage but, by the 1860s, female suffrage was finally on the agenda with the formation of the Birmingham Women’s Suffrage Society in 1868. In 1869 women were able to vote and stand in local elections and in 1870, they were able to serve on School Boards. Eliza Sturge was elected to the first school Board in Birmingham and Edgbaston resident Catherine Osler emerged as a major campaigner in Birmingham for female suffrage (see her profile on our website). The twentieth century campaign for female suffrage and the Suffragettes in Birmingham deserves an article in its own right but it was not until 1930 that full universal suffrage was achieved, one hundred years after the BPU was set up.

For sources and further background reading please visit our website: fbmt.org.uk/publications.

Illustrations:

'Meeting of the Birmingham Political Union' by Benjamin Robert Haydon, 1832-33; 1937P370; Presented by the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, 1937; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0
*Painting depicts the meeting of the Unions on New Hall Hill, Birmingham May 7th, 1832

[Birmingham Museums Trust | Image Details - 1937P370 Meeting of the Birmingham Political Union](#)



[Birmingham Museums Trust | Image Details - 1981F15 Suffragist Banner - West Midland Federation](#)

'Suffragist Banner - West Midland Federation', 1912; 1981F15; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0

* Shield-shaped banner, with figure of Justice central. Applied, painted, edged with metallic braid and backed with white twill cotton.

Sources and further reading

1) Carl Chinn and Malcolm Dick (eds.), 'Birmingham: The Workshop of the World', LUP, 2016

Chapter 6 is by Roger Ward who has written widely on Birmingham's political history and provides a succinct overview of the topic and is a good starting point.

2) John Money, 'Experience and Identity: Birmingham and the West Midlands, 1760-1800', MUP, 1977

This academic text provides a detailed insight into the election of Charles Holte as a Warwickshire MP in 1774, from a particular perspective. The appendix contains a fascinating breakdown of all the voting patterns by district and candidate across the County of Warwick.

3) Carlos Flick, 'The Birmingham Political Union and the Movements for Reform in Britain, 1830–1839', Archon Books, 1978

An academic study of the BPU which is thoroughly researched and provides a real insight into the topic. He has a somewhat maverick view that Attwood and the BPU were largely a provincial movement with little national impact.

4) Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Fully accessible with a Birmingham Library membership card.

- a) Thomas Attwood by Clive Behagg. A good insight by an historian who has written extensively about Birmingham.
- b) George Edmonds by Susan Thomas. Through her research Susan has brought much greater attention to Edmonds and how central he was to the reform movement in Birmingham. Her unpublished PhD is a great source of information, 'George Edmonds and the development of Birmingham Radicalism'.

5) Les Williams, 'Forgotten Brummies: The men and women who shaped today's Birmingham, who are now largely forgotten', Brewin Books, 2021

A recent publication which has a great selection of profiles including Thomas Attwood and others involved in Birmingham's development.

6) George J. Barnsby, 'Birmingham Working People, Integrated Publishing Services, 1989

Referenced before in previous articles, there is a detailed history of the BPU, Chartism and the 1867 reform act, in a Birmingham context.

7) D.J. Moss, 'Thomas Attwood: the biography of a radical', McGill-Queen's University Press.

The definitive biography of Thomas Attwood.

Contemporary Sources

J.A. Langford, 'Modern Birmingham and its institutions: A Chronicle of Local Events, from 1841-71 Volume 2', Published 1878

A fascinating source of information and insight by someone who lived through and was involved in many of the events that shaped Victorian Birmingham. Available through the reference library or as a reprint.

George J. Holyoake, 'Sixty years of an agitator's life', published 1892, T. Fisher Unwin, 2 volumes

A remarkable insight into Victorian Britain. Born in Birmingham, Holyoake was an eyewitness to many of the BPU and Chartist events in Birmingham before he moved away from the town. In volume one he writes about the rallies on Newhall Hill and the various speakers such as Attwood and Edmunds.

Further Illustrations

[Birmingham Museums Trust | Image Details - 1978P253](#)

[Portrait of Thomas Attwood](#)

'Portrait of Thomas Attwood' drawn by W Green, J B Allen, 1832, 1978P253; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CCO

* Thomas Attwood was founder of the Birmingham Political Union, the leading figure in the public campaign for the Great Reform Act of 1832.

Inscription reads - Above: 'The Friend of the People'. Below: 'Thomas Attwood, Esqr., Printed & Published By Josia H Allen 5 Bennett's Hill Birm. Aug 20.1832.' To Scroll: 'Great Meeting - New Hall Hill.'



[Birmingham Museums Trust | Image Details - 1927V12](#) Portrait: John Bright Esq MP for Birmingham

'Portrait of John Bright Esq MP for Birmingham', Engraver: D J Pound, After: J Whitlock, 1927V12; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CCO

John Bright, an MP in Birmingham in the 1860s (elected in 1858), became central to the campaign for the Second Reform act of 1867, with Birmingham again being the heart of matter. The campaign resulted in the vote being extended to skilled male workers and to women in local government elections. His name lives on in John Bright Street, now pedestrianised and near the Alexandra Theatre in Birmingham city centre.

[Birmingham Museums Trust | Image Details - 1996F84 Newspaper Cutting - Chartist Riots](#)

Newspaper Cutting - Chartist Riots, 1996F84;
Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust,
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This satirical cartoon is commenting on the Chartist riots of 1838, suggesting that perhaps much of the reporting was somewhat exaggerated. The national Chartist leadership had moved from London to Birmingham and there were large rallies and daily public meetings in the Bull Ring. With Birmingham being at the heart of the gun trade at the time, and with an estimated 40,000 men able to use guns, the town was always a concern for the authorities. Consequently, London police were brought to Birmingham, along with reinforcements from the Dragoons based in Vauxhall Barracks. The inevitable conflagration happened in the Bull Ring, where people had gathered to hear Chartist speakers. As a consequence, Birmingham did become central to campaigns for universal suffrage again until the 1860s.

