

Bristol's Burning:

the riots of Oct.1831

A summary of an historical walk in the
footsteps of Bristolian rioters
with *Steve Spears*, Aug. 2018,
Walks Leader, M-Shed.

The Shocking Story of Bristolians, driven to peaceful protest, roused to violence by the actions of the military.

The Cast of Characters:

The Demon: **Sir Charles Wetherall** MP (seat in Yorkshire):

Senior judge and Recorder

in Bristol for the twice-yearly Assizes.

A bombastic man, provocative, opinionated, bereft of tact.

The Ditherer: **Mayor Charles Pinney**, from a family who, till recently,

owned West Indian sugar plantations,

a reformist Whig, elected by Tory Aldermen.

A (nervous) young man, holding a senior post for the first time.

The Reluctant Enforcer: **Lt-Colonel Brereton**:

49, a widower with two young daughters,

Commander of the local red-coat Cavalry, barracked in Bristol

Known and liked around Bristol by the working, and the wealthy members of the public.

The Dashing Dragoon: **Captain Gage**, leading the Blues,

a hot-head, fancied himself at the head of a sabre charge

hoped to be recognised as ‘hero of the hour’

The Unexpected Guest: **Major Digby Mackworth** aide to Lord Rowland Hill,

Commander in Chief of the Army (not to be messed with).

Heard there was trouble and just happened to pop by

The Rebel Scapegoats: **Christopher Davis**, the only ‘professional’ person,

William Clarke, Joseph Kayes, Thomas Gregory

and **Richard Vines** (sent to an asylum).

The Context:

Tensions during the decades around the turn of the century, revolution and war raging across the Channel and with similar complaints of famine, unemployment and incompetent governance, led to real unrest amongst the poor and great unease amongst the propertied classes. Surprisingly, during the French wars, more soldiers remained in England ‘to keep the peace’, than were sent to fight ‘Boney’.

Corruption and incompetence in the highest levels led to campaigns for reform of the electoral system and a re-drawing of constituency boundaries. This was particularly aimed at ending the ‘rotten boroughs’ where population had dwindled over the centuries yet still returned MPs in contrast to the huge new northern metropolises which had no representation.

Hopes were raised with a new King William IV and a new reformist Whig Prime Minister, Earl Grey (he of the tea).

In Bristol, the Corporation was elected by its (mostly merchant) burgesses, who were entirely self-serving. They even stole money from the taxes raised and even from the local Quaker Charity School. They also entertained themselves by holding around 19 lavish banquets each year, paid for out of taxes. Local services were abominable. The Corporation preferred to build a new gaol in 1816-20, and a Cut to give tidal access for smaller vessels to Bathurst Basin, basically a rear entrance to the harbour. The new Floating Harbour was non-tidal. During the very hot summer of 1825, it stank. The Corporation was eventually forced by Act of Parliament to invest in Milne's culvert, to flush out the sewage and debris. So the new Cut was built

Electoral Reform, however, was not a top priority for many in Bristol. The then current debate about extending the franchise would only have meant that a few more wealthy residents would join the fray – those with 40s freehold. Bristol's population c.100,000 and about 6% could vote (national average was only 3%). Nevertheless, the Reform Bill had passed the House of Commons, in September, but was thrown out by the Lords (both spiritual and temporal) in October: bishops were not the flavour of the month for, their numbers were great enough to have enabled the reformers to have won.

Nationally, the issue of Reform was becoming a potent one: during 1831 protests turned violent in Derby, in Nottingham and there was a ‘Rising’ in Merthyr Tydfil, South Wales that held the military at bay for several days. The ‘authorities’ were getting jumpy.

The Bristol Assizes were due. To prepare for forthcoming events, the Corporation asked Lord Melbourne for military protection. He responded with short shrift. The request to postpone the Assize was refused and hoped for military backup was restricted to the use of two red-coat Cavalry units (which were already in the area) and some hardened men from the 14th Light Dragoons (around 60 ‘Bloody Blues’) ‘to be kept in the background’.

The Corporation had around 120 Watchmen – ‘Night-time Charlies’ who took turns to watch the 12 divisions within Bristol. These were bolstered by 100 Ward constables (‘Blugeon Boys’), drawn from their communities, whose duty was to rotate this task for a year at a time. In addition the Corporation had called for 300 extra ‘special constables’ (who would be paid). Only 100 came forward, including engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel (who needed to keep the Corporation sweet to get permissions and contracts for his works). Others were merely spoiling for a fight, with no discipline or care for consequences.

The Immediate Causes:

Mon October 24th had been set as the day for George Henry Law, **Bishop of Bath and Wells** to arrive in Bristol to dedicate the new church of St Paul. The Bishop had not voted for reform in the House of Lords. Sensing the uneasy atmosphere, having completed his task, he fled back to Wells and pulled up the drawbridge over the Palace Moat for fear of hostile actions from fellow Wellensians.

Sat. October 29th was the day planned for **Recorder Charles Wetherall** to arrive and formally open proceedings for the autumn Assizes. As custom dictated, once near Bristol, he changed from his personal coach into the official sheriff's coach so as to arrive at the Guildhall with all due pomp and ceremony. Whilst performing this manoeuvre, the coach was stoned.



Regardless, he drove on to the Council House. But the proceedings were drowned out by protesters in the public galleries. Eventually he was persuaded to retreat and take refuge in the Mayor's Mansion House on the corner of Queen Square – a large elegant regency residential area, close to the floating harbour, quayside and the new Cut.

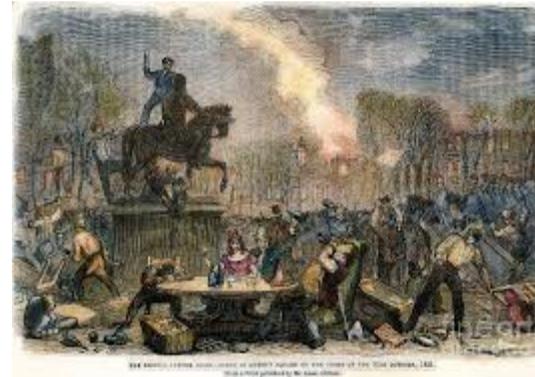
The brick-fronted three-storied houses were the homes of many professional families, and some were important public offices, for example the Customs House – another enterprise unloved by the local people, for such taxes increased prices.

The imposing buildings enclosed a green space in which crowds were gathering. By afternoon around 10,000 people had gathered, nervously watched by around 100 constables armed only with staves. They were described as *dirty, depraved* and, in particular, *women being of abandoned character, using foul and abusive language*. But they seemed quiet, so the Constables went home for tea.

Sat. 17.30 Mayor Pinney came out to talk to the crowds. He stood on a chair and began to speak, rebuking them and telling them to return to home. He threatened to read the Riot Act but was stoned and quickly returned behind his front door. The Corporation retreated to upstairs rooms and hoped it would soon all go away. The crowd became restless. Individual members were arrested and sent to nearby Bridewell prison.

This further incensed their supporters. Quickly, the crowd became a mob which battered down the door and surged into the building. They were blocked at the stairs – but found their way to the kitchens. The first Bristol Food Fest began!

Huge quantities of food were brought out and distributed amongst the hungry protesters. Wetherall was unceremoniously pushed over the back wall so he could make his escape – to a safer house on St Michael's Hill.



Food, intended for the banquet, was passed out amongst the crowd who eagerly devoured it...

Sat 18.00 Lt-Col Brereton arrived with some red-coat Cavalry. Being known and liked locally, he was cheered – which perhaps made him overconfident. Soon afterwards Major Digby Mackworth arrived, in civvies, and offered to help. Brereton reported that the crowd was busy eating and causing no trouble.



Brereton urged the crowd to leave and return to their homes. He still believed them to be high-spirited rather than to pose any danger at this stage.

Nevertheless, Mackworth announced he would 'train' and organise the 'special constables'.

The Cavalry were detailed to move among the people, disperse them but not to use anything but the *'flat of their sabres'*. During the night, six were used, in rotated pairs for 2-hour shifts, to guard the Mansion House and prevent another invasion.

Mid-night: A troop of 30 from the 14th Light Dragoons under Captain Gage were sent to guard the Corn St Council House *'as a precaution'*. They charged and in a scuffle, one person was killed. However, soon all seemed quiet, until...

Sunday October 30th

...very early, in the dark morning hours, news began to spread that somebody had died. Buildings opposite the Exchange (also in Corn St) were set alight.

Digby-Mackworth went to check on the Mayor (holed up in the Mansion House)



The Mayor was persuaded to go up and over the back wall, from where he crawled along the roof tops into the Customs House, hoping (wrongly) that it would be safer.

The crowd was getting restless. Another attack on Mansion House found the cellars. About 400 cases of wine were soon handed around the Square – and much enjoyed.

Sun. 9.00 Brereton returned to the Square and was again cheered by the, now, drunken, gathering. He urged them to drink up and go home.

Brereton had learned of the night's violent actions of 14th Light Dragoons and he ordered them back to barracks near College Green. They were pursued by a crowd - mostly youngsters with stones (50% of city population was under 16 years old). The Blues, under Gage, kept turning and threatening to charge. Eventually they let off a volley of shots. Brereton was furious and ordered them out of town - in fact to Keynsham barracks, and to use the back routes so as not to inflame the populace still further.

Sun. 12.00 The drunken mob turned to attack Brideswell Prison. Keeper Evans had just sat down to eat. Having successfully released their compatriots, they surged passed Queen Square towards the iron foundry and demanded tools with which to attack New Gaol. The owner listed the tools taken and asked for them to be returned on Monday! (Never argue with a mob.)

Magistrates ordered all gunsmiths to hide weapons.

Sun. 18.30 All three prisons were on fire. Toll-gates were also burned – hated symbols of authority which severely impacted on small traders bringing goods. Mansion House was still being nominally guarded.

Sun. 20.00 Rumours spread that the Bishop's Palace was on fire. A single official, William Williams, stayed to 'guard' the cathedral, which luckily was not attacked.

Sun 23.00 By this time Queens Square was alight, the Fires had spread to the Customs House where huge quantities of wines roared into flames. Amidst confusion over who had authority to order a charge, several hours were lost.



Queen's Square on fire then



and now.



Burning of Mansion House by William James Muller, and now.



Mon. 2.00 Dr Goldney reported the crowds in Queen's Square were quietening, 'just looting'. Meanwhile, reinforcements were gathering from afar. An express coach had been dispatched to Cardiff for military assistance. .

Mon 3.00. The coach arrived in Newport, where its progress along the Highway was delayed by crowds gathered at the town bridge and at Stow Hill to view the sight of Bristol burning. Word got out what was happening in Bristol.

Mon 4.00 The 3rd Dragoon Guards, under Captain Warrington charged Queen Square. New troops and their Commander arrived from Gloucester. Monday morning dawned. From the outskirts, people arrived to work, not realising the seriousness of the situation.

Mon 7.00 Lt. Colonel Love of 11th Foot Regiment prepared to journey to Bristol with up to 200 of his men to give help. He marched his men the 12 miles or so to Newport, arriving before noon, but a dense crowd obstructed passage across the bridge, preventing the troops reaching the river quay. Some of the protestors tried to cut the steam packet adrift. Love ordered them to give way, threatening military action. The troops eventually embarked

The Mayor begged everyone to stay indoors and announced “*Anyone found on the streets is assumed to be a rioter.*” Some were killed, many wounded, hundreds arrested. Numbers are unclear, as many hurt would slink home to avoid detection.



3rd Dragoons attack mercilessly, then



and now.

Monday 15.00 Col Love and the 11th Foot disembarked at Sea Mills, from where they then marched up to Clifton and then on to the town.

Mon 18.00 The troops at last reached their destination, by which time it was all over, bar the mopping up operations. Nevertheless, their presence was probably reassuring to the authorities as the atmosphere was still tense.

Tuesday: Fires were still burning. It is estimated that 40 wagonloads of looted furniture were taken. Later, when houses were searched, anyone possessing a suspicious item was arrested.

When a young boy, these events were witnessed by Charles Kingsley (author of the children’s fantasy *The Water Babies*). He recalls the many smouldering ruins, in front of which were rows of fragments of bodies, lying in heaps. A searing, macabre sight for a child.

Aftermath:

There always has to be someone to blame. It was reported that the core rioters were ‘not Bristolians’. Blame was laid on ‘the Irish’, some ‘outsiders’.

It was Lt Col Brereton (he who had tried to dampen the anger, pacify the crowd and to minimize bloodshed), who was accused of delays and incompetency.

He was in his late forties, hoping to serve out his final years before retiring to look after his two young daughters bereft of their mother who had died recently.

After the humiliations of the first days of his trial, he tragically committed suicide before the court-martial was concluded.

Mayor Pinney’s trial collapsed. Both he and Wetherall lived on untrammelled.

The Trial of the Rioters began in January 1832. Five were condemned to hang, though one was reprieved and sent to an asylum. Around 33 were transported.

Finally, a Commission was set up to investigate the damage inflicted - mostly on properties of the professional class, around the Square and beyond – estimated at thousands of pounds.



The Council House, Corn St, used for Assize

Trials.

The Great Reform Act was passed later that year and the Municipal Boroughs Act three years later. Both of these were small steps to reduce corruption in governance. Much remained to be done.