

(X) AGITATION FOR RELEASE



FLAGRANT injustice, inadequately describes a sentence which awakened the utmost indignation amongst the workers throughout the country. Nor was the indignation confined to the Unions. People of all shades of opinion joined in the protests. Meetings and demonstrations were held denouncing the conduct of the trial and the severity of the sentence. Trade Unionists felt that the whole procedure was merely a pretext of the Government to strike a blow at the Trade Unions. The comments which appeared in the press, and some of the ministerial speeches in Parliament show how justifiable this feeling was.

Grand National
starts its
campaign

The Grand National Consolidated Trades Union felt that its own existence was at stake. It concentrated the whole of its force on organising meetings and petitions of protest. It quickly established contact with the principal Unions in the North who collaborated with the Grand National in the agitation. Petitions poured into the House of Commons, presented in many cases by people who expressly disclaimed that they were supporters of the Trade Unions, but who were none the less, revolted at the vindictive character of the sentence.

At the instigation of Robert Owen, the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union called a Grand Meeting of the Working Classes on March 24, 1834. This meeting was presided over by Dr. Arthur S. Wade, D.D., the Vicar of St. Nicholas, Warwick, and a leading figure in London Radicalism. A resolution was passed on the motion of Owen, protesting against the trial and the cruel sentence. A petition was adopted at the meeting urging the House of Commons to ask the King to suspend the sentence until the matter could be properly considered. It requested that a Committee be established to examine the principles and objects of the Unions, which it believed were not only just but most praiseworthy. This meeting was attended by over 10,000 persons and the feeling of resentment expressed was real and profound.



National Portrait Gallery.

WILLIAM COBBETT

William Cobbett presented the petition to Parliament, but it was ordered to lie on the table. Meanwhile, a provisional committee had been formed, in which those responsible for the meeting of March 24 continued to take an active part. This Committee met regularly at the "Red Lion Tavern," York Street, St. James Square, London. Its purpose was to

arrange for demonstrations throughout the country, to protest and to memorialise the King to remit the sentence. It appealed to all to assist the Committee in affording relief to the wives and families of the condemned men. Meetings were held in different parts of the country at which financial assistance was contributed and the organisation of petitions was undertaken. The *True Sun*, the *Pioneer*, the *Poor Man's Guardian* and *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register* all contained frequent mention of the development of the campaign of protest.

Meetings of protest

On March 30, 1834, a further public meeting in London was held at the Institute, Charlotte Street, and a deputation was appointed to present a petition to the Home Secretary. About 12,000 people had meant to accompany the deputation, but they were dissuaded from doing so lest they should commit a breach of the peace. The petition was duly laid before the King, but he refused to act upon it. Another meeting took place on April 3 at the same place, with Dr. Wade in the Chair. After several resolutions expressive of the abhorrence of the people at the cruelty of the Government, the verses written down during his trial by George Loveless were sung with great fervour.

The *Pioneer* on April 12, 1834, announced the receipt of subscriptions to relieve the distressed families. The list was soon supplemented by contributions from the Silk Weavers, Silk Hatters, Gardeners, Shipwrights, Joiners, Cordwainers, Journeymen Tailors, Caulkers, Journeymen Paper Stainers, Coach Painters, Trimmers, Wheelers and the Brushmakers. Individual contributions, although small, were coming in freely and further meetings were reported from Newcastle, Belfast, Cheltenham, Hull, Yeovil, Liverpool, Leeds and Marylebone. Within the next fortnight petitions reached the House of Commons from Wolverhampton, Macclesfield, Loughborough, Sheffield, Nottingham, Walsall, Barnsley, Newcastle, Leicester, Bradford, Manchester and Halifax.

Relief for the distressed families



National Portrait Gallery.

JOSEPH HUME

Steadily but surely this agitation reflected itself more and more in a changed attitude on the part of Members who had hitherto been hostile to the demand for release. Mr. Hardy (Bradford) who, on March 26, had called the Trade Unions a curse, by April 14 had so far changed his views that he could see no objection to workmen entering into combinations to better their conditions. This was typical of the changed tone that members were adopting. Daniel O'Connell (Dublin City), despite his former antipathy to the Unions, had declared himself strongly in favour of mitigating the sentence. He wanted

to know why, if Trade Unions were acting illegally by taking an oath, members of the Freemasons, Orange Lodges, the Oddfellows and others, many of whom were in the House of Commons, were allowed to go scot-free.

On April 16, 1834, Mr. Hutt (Kingston-on-Hull) presented a petition signed by over 7,000 members of the Union in his constituency. He roundly asserted that the men were not punished for taking a secret oath, but for having been members of a Trade Union. Feargus O'Connell (Cork County) affirmed that the men who should be on board the hulks in place of the Dorsetshire labourers were the Prime Minister, the Lord Chancellor, and the Secretary for the Colonies.



FEARGUS O'CONNOR

and the Secretary for the Colonies. A couple of days later, Major Beauclerk (Leeds) presented a petition hoping that the House of Commons would interpose and not allow one law for the rich and another for the poor. Joseph Hume (Middlesex) brought a virile passion for liberty to bear on the House in an earnest exhortation to redress the cruel and unjust act that had been perpetrated. J. A. Roebuck (Bath) who fought so valiantly on behalf of the men throughout the whole agitation, argued that the law was so obscure that many lawyers were in ignorance of its existence. Half the legal profession thought the sentence was not legal, and all would acknowledge that the law was most severely administered. He accused the Government of hurrying the men off to transportation to prevent the general expression of public sympathy from having any effect in their favour.

The Government appeared to be quite unimpressed, and petition after petition was ordered to lie upon the table. Still the agitation continued outside the House, grew steadily in volume, and attracted more and more people who realised that a shocking perversion of justice had taken place. The *Times* reports a meeting at the "Crown and Anchor" in the Strand, on April 18, 1834. Long before the time of opening of proceedings, the great room of the Tavern was crowded to suffocation, over 3,000 persons being present. There was a very distinguished company on the platform, the Chairman being Colonel Evans, M.P. for Westminster.

Daniel O'Connell, at the meeting, said that as a lawyer he had the gravest doubts about the legality of the conviction. The Government had refused him a copy of the conviction, and he was determined that his object was not to be defeated by such tricks. He pointed out that the Judge, Baron Williams, had contended that he had no alternative but to sentence the men to seven years' transportation once they had been found guilty.

The petitions
continue

The agitation
grows

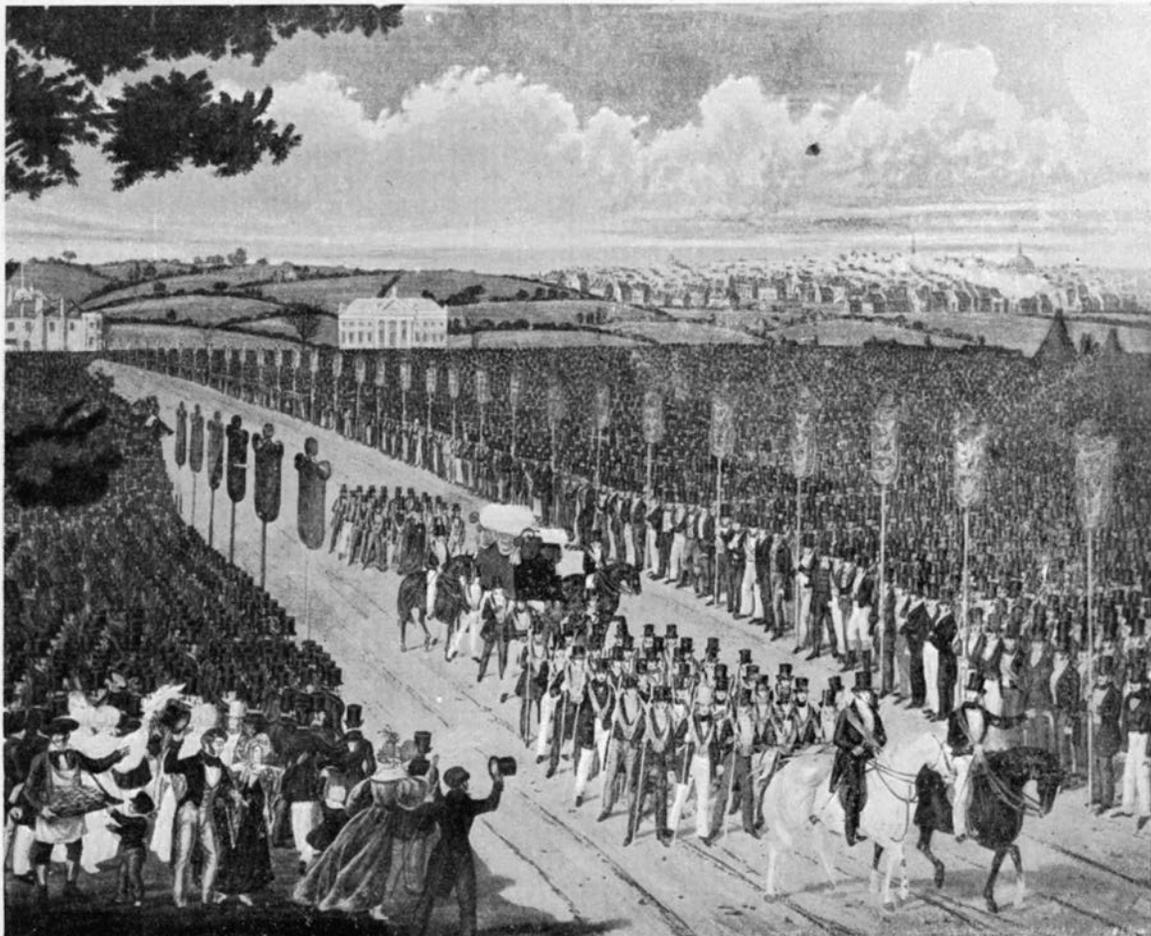
O'Connell
attacks the
conviction

He might, in his discretion, thundered O'Connell, have affixed the sentence at any length from one day to seven years, but he thought fit to inflict the highest penalty.

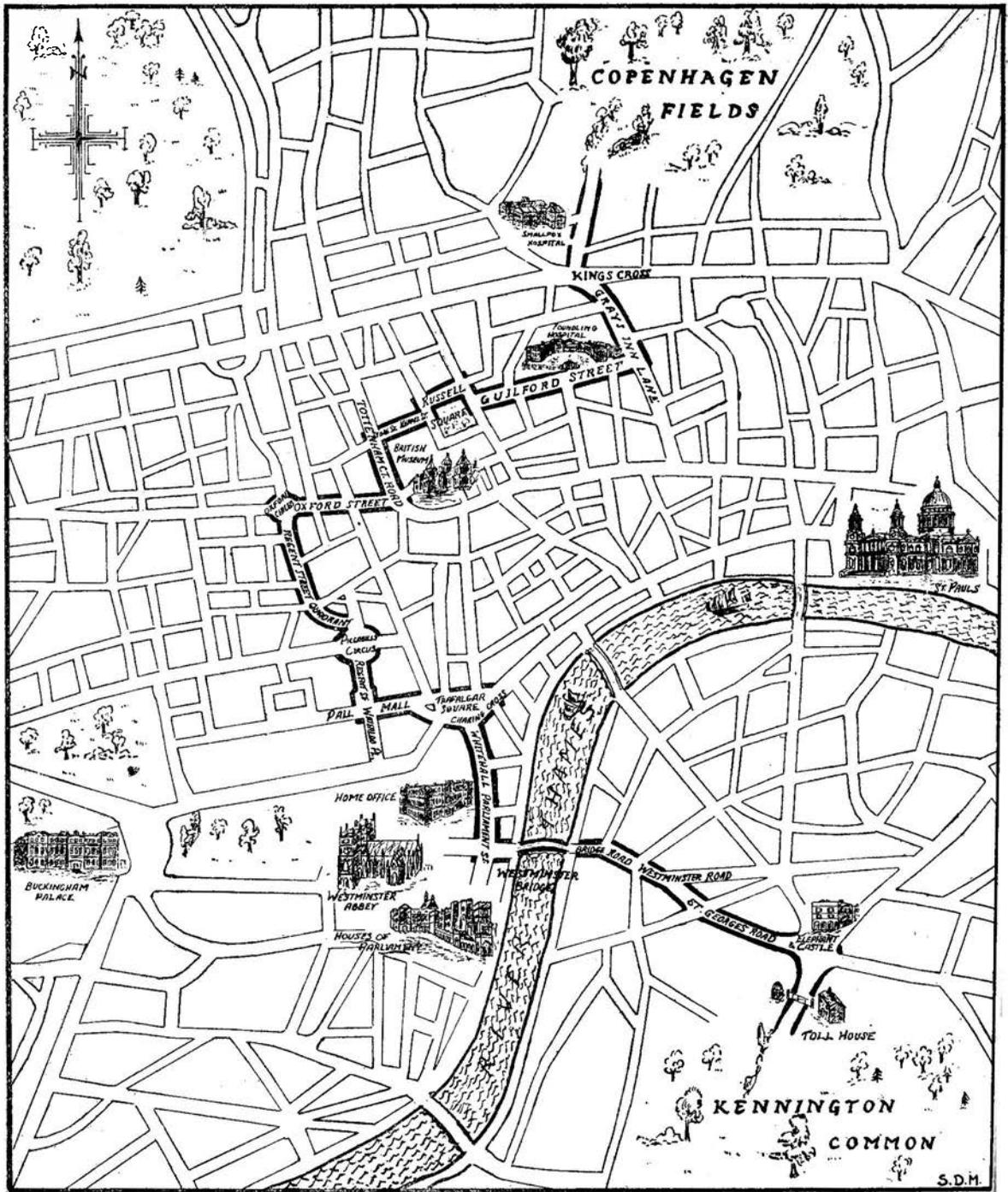
J. A. Roebuck, M.P., speaking as a lawyer, contended that the men were not only morally but legally innocent. He expressed astonishment at the news that the Government had sent away the men in such indecent haste to New South Wales. It would have been more decent to have allowed them to remain in this country in order that their case might have been argued in the House of Commons or in the Court of King's Bench.

Roebuck
indicts the
Government

This meeting was the forerunner of a mighty demonstration which took place on Monday, April 21, 1834, at Copenhagen Fields, London. It was feared that widespread disorder might result from this demonstration and extraordinary precautions were taken to deal with any outbreaks. In addition to the Life Guards, and the other House-



DEMONSTRATION AT COPENHAGEN FIELDS, LONDON



MAP SHOWING THE ROUTE OF PROCESSION FROM COPENHAGEN FIELDS

hold Troops, detachments of the 12th and 17th Lancers, two troops of the 2nd Dragoons, eight battalions of infantry, and twenty-nine pieces of ordnance or cannon were mustered. The City Court of Aldermen were engaged in swearing-in special constables in response to a straight intimation from Lord Melbourne that the Government would look to the Magistrates for assistance in the event of a tumult arising.

More than 5,000 special constables were sworn in at the Guildhall. Altogether, the City was very much like an armed camp, but the authorities had the discretion to keep both police and troops out of sight. Along the whole route of the procession, there was scarcely a policeman and not a single soldier to be seen. It was the intention to take a route from Copenhagen Fields, situated near King's Cross, to Whitehall, to present a huge memorial to the Home Secretary, asking for the remission of the sentence.

Soon after 7 o'clock in the morning, the processionists began to gather and Trade Union banners and emblems of the different lodges were soon flying in the breeze, arranged at convenient distances by members of the Unions who, on horseback, marshalled the procession. A little before 8 o'clock the Committee in charge of the arrangements, headed by Robert Owen and Dr. Wade, arrived. Dr. Wade, a stalwart figure weighing twenty stones, was dressed in the full canonicals of a Doctor of Divinity and

The City an
armed camp



THE "ELEPHANT AND CASTLE," 1830

rode throughout in the vanguard. At 8 o'clock the roads were filled with a dense mass of men, and the banners were "supported by a numerous and well-disciplined corps." The scene was most imposing and the utmost decorum prevailed. Notwithstanding the large crowds everything was peaceable, orderly and well arranged.

The procession moved from Copenhagen Fields, King's Cross, Gray's Inn Lane, Guilford Street, Russell Square, Keppell Street, Tottenham Court Road, Oxford Street, Regent Street, the Quadrant, Waterloo Place, Pall Mall, Charing Cross and Whitehall. To quote the *Times* again, "The procession, as it passed along, was not unfrequently greeted by loud cheers from the congregated spectators lining the streets and crowding the house tops, but every such manifestation of feeling was immediately checked by the Unionists themselves, who seemed anxious not only to maintain order themselves, but to set an example of peace, discipline, and decorum to the bystanders."

Arrived at Whitehall the petition which had been borne on the shoulders of twelve Unionists, was taken into the office of the Home Secretary, Lord Melbourne. Melbourne, who had watched the procession from the windows of the Home Office, refused to see the Deputation and would not accept the petition accompanied by a multitude in procession. If it should be presented on another day and in a more becoming manner, he would lay it before the King. This was communicated to the Deputation, not by Melbourne himself, but by his Secretary, Mr. Phillips, who had previously refused to discuss matters while Robert Owen was present. Owen was not one of the Deputation, all of whom were working Trade Unionists. The Deputation thereupon retired taking the petition with them.

Whilst the deputation was at the Home Office, the procession moved down Parliament Street and over Westminster Bridge. From there it went up St. George's Road past the Elephant and Castle, through Kennington Road to Kennington Common, which was entered by a gate close to the Kennington Toll House. Here, after a brief pause, the

procession dispersed, the members having been on their feet from 7 o'clock in the morning until half-past four in the afternoon. The number of people in this procession has been variously estimated. One contemporary put the numbers present at over 120,000, but it is probable that not less than 50,000 people, apart from casual spectators along the route, took part in the march. The dignified demeanour of the members made a very favourable impression on the spectators.

Melbourne
refuses the
petition

An orderly
demonstration



KENNINGTON TOLL HOUSE, 1834