

JOSEPH HANSON — ‘THE WEAVER’S FRIEND’

Eddie Little

In August 1808 a Grand Jury at Lancaster indicted Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Hanson on a charge of misdemeanor in aiding and abetting the weavers of Manchester in a conspiracy to raise their wages. The trial was held during the Spring Assizes in 1809. Hanson was found guilty and sentenced to six months imprisonment and a fine of £100.

Reflecting on ‘this ill — advised prosecution’ over forty years later, Archibald Prentice considered that ‘it introduced that bitter feeling of employed against employers which was manifested in 1812, 1817, 1819 and 1826’.¹ In 1812 and in 1826 there had been attacks on power looms; in 1817 there had been the abortive Blanketeers March. In August 1819 the Peterloo Massacre had taken place.

Understandably these larger events have tended to obscure the career of Joseph Hanson whose prosecution and premature death in 1811 possibly contributed to the political climate under-pinning them. However, Hanson’s life has been regrettably neglected by historians. E. P. Thompson regarded Hanson’s prosecution as indicative of ‘the full vindictiveness of the authorities’ but gave no further information about him. Duncan Bythell observed that Hanson was ‘an extremely unconventional and controversial character’, but little other detail is given about him. Indeed the last, and incomplete, attempt to assess Hanson’s life was evidently made in the 1940s.²

An examination of Hanson’s career is informative for two reasons. First, it embraced the economic, military and political life of the North West during the Napoleonic War. Second, it demonstrates the remarkably narrow and precarious ground upon which middle-class reformers had to stand and the penalties they faced for ‘disloyalty’ to their class.

Hanson was born in 1774 into a Unitarian family. His father, William, was a manufacturer of checks and African goods. From the age of seventeen Joseph was employed in the family business. He was a receiver of goods from the weavers at Middleton and had established a reputation for fairness. The Hanson business was evidently a prosperous one. In addition to the family home at Hanson Court off Cannon Street in Manchester, Joseph lived at Pendlebury Hall. In 1808 he retired from active business and moved to Strangeways Hall where he lived for the rest of his life. Until the age of thirty-one Hanson’s career was uncontroversial and characterised by its conformity. By 1796 both Joseph and his father held positions in the Court Leet, the body which could nominate and elect parish officers. Joseph had a supervisory responsibility for the Hanging Ditch, Withy Grove, Shude Hill area. His first public speech appears to have been given in 1794 at the Collegiate Church when he appealed for assistance on behalf of the family of a man who had drowned in the Mersey.

Manchester and the volunteer movement

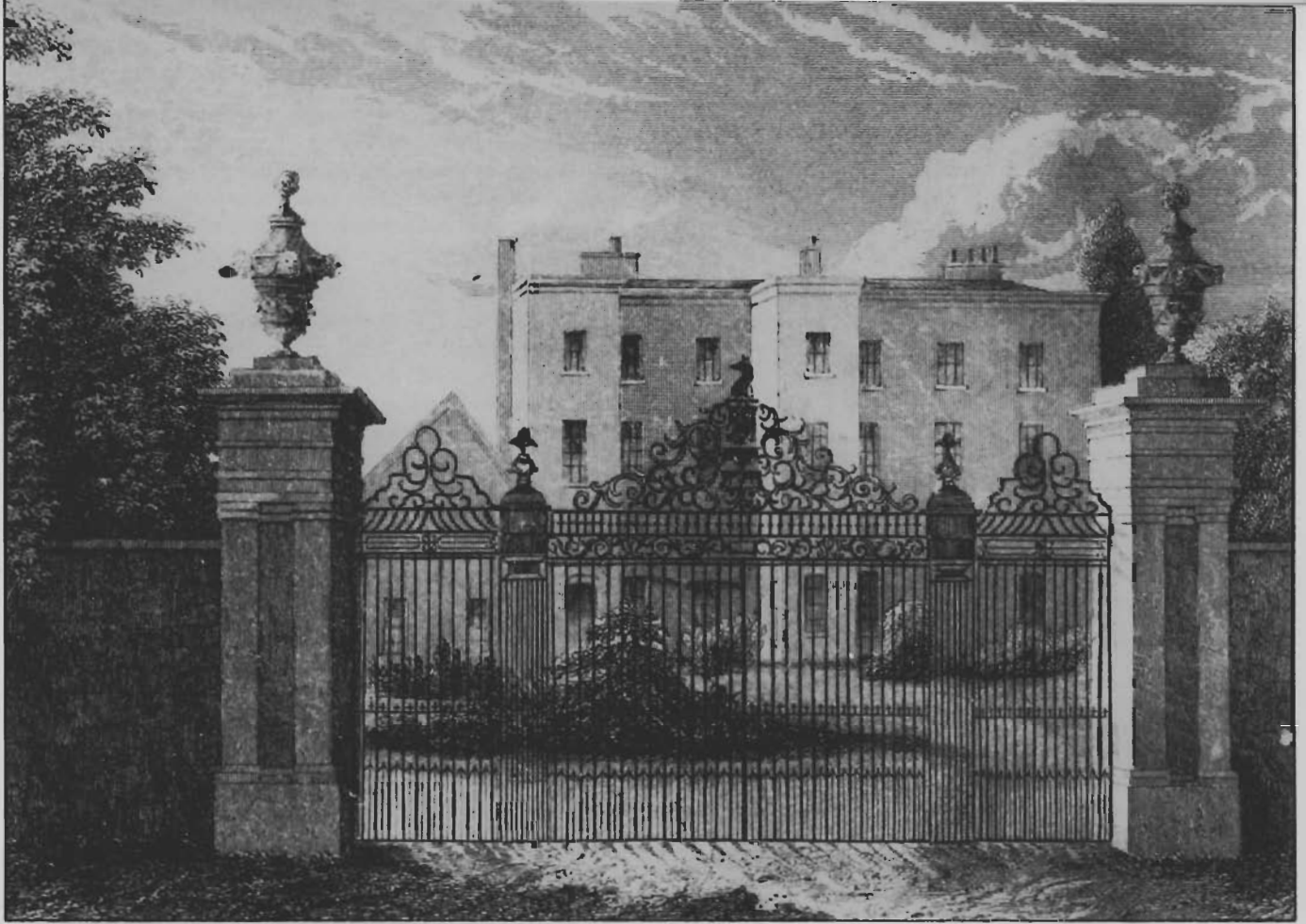
After 1803 Hanson’s career became inter-twined with the course of the Napoleonic War which resumed in that year



Joseph Hanson, Lieut. Col. Commandant of the Manchester & Salford Independent Rifle Regiment.

after the collapse of the shortlived Peace of Amiens. The threat of a French invasion prompted the government to make an appeal for the formation of local volunteer companies for home defence. There was a great response, but the government recognised belatedly that they had neither arms, equipment or instructors for the new companies. Official encouragement was given to anyone who could raise and maintain an independent volunteer company. This proved, as Manchester was to illustrate, a recipe for rivalry and friction.

On the 21 July 1803 a number of prominent citizens requested the Boroughreeve and Constables of Manchester and Salford to call a public meeting ‘for the purpose of determining upon the most advisable means of contributing their support to the Government in the General Defence of the Country, and of convincing the common enemy of the unanimity, energy and effort with which not only the Lives and Properties but the Laws and Liberties of Englishmen will ever be defended’.³ Hanson was to associate himself prominently with these sentiments and threw himself enthusiastically into the volunteer movement. His later resignation from the volunteers and his alignment with radical politics exposed him to the charges of treachery and defection. Paradoxically his patriotism and volunteer activities were later deployed by his enemies to indicate his duplicity and ensure that he be made a public example whose fate would be a warning to others.



Strangeways Hall, Hanson's home from 1808.

A well attended meeting took place on the 2 August. At the suggestion of James Ackers of Salford and John Leigh Philips, a leading Manchester merchant, the decision was taken to reconstitute the Royal Manchester and Salford Volunteers. This was a battalion of 600 men which had been stood down at the peace treaty. Leigh Philips argued that the creation of new independent corps would only produce competition. In fact two local regiments were to be created: the reconstituted Royal Manchester and Salford Volunteers and a new unit, the First Regiment of the Manchester and Salford Volunteers. The government accepted these arrangements on the 16 August, but by this time enthusiastic individuals were forming their own Corps which could be incorporated into these regiments.

At this meeting Hanson announced that he would form a new Volunteer Rifle Corps which would 'serve without pay, and to furnish their own clothes, arms and accoutrements, and to march to any part of Great Britain in case of actual invasion'. The Militia Act 1803 had divided England into thirteen districts for defence purposes. The North West involved Cheshire, Shropshire, Lancashire and North Wales and was commanded by the Duke of Cumberland. Hanson moved quickly to secure official endorsement for his new Corps. By the 11 August he had received a letter of support from the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Derby, and a communication from Lord Hobart, the Secretary of State for Defence and the Colonies, signifying 'His Majesty's approbation and acceptance' of Hanson's Volunteer Corps. Hanson's involvement in the Volunteers would, within the next four years, involve him in at least two major public disputes, an attempted duel and eventually an abrupt and controversial resignation from the force in 1807.

Within a few weeks of the Manchester meeting £22,000 was raised in local subscriptions and 2,000 men enlisted in

the proliferation of new volunteer corps in Manchester and the surrounding area. At a grand review of the local volunteer corps held at Sale Moor in April 1804 there were detachments from Trafford, Heaton Norris, Failsworth, Moston, Hulme, Little Heaton, Crumpsall and Eccles in addition to Manchester and Salford. In December 1803 Hanson and other Volunteer officers had been presented at Court. Yet, despite the pageantry, the Manchester Volunteers had in actuality little of the 'unanimity' which their inaugural meeting had proclaimed.

Hanson was determined to play a major role in the Volunteers and Leigh Philips and Ackers believed that he was attempting to obtain precedence over the commanding officers of both the Royal and the First Regiments. On the 14 September 1803 they visited Lord Derby and expressed their disapproval. They also made it clear that if this was indeed Hanson's intentions they would not proceed with the formation of their own Corps. Derby, with prudence, advised Ackers and Leigh Philips to contact Lord Hobart. They were in the process of doing this when the matter appeared to be resolved with the publication of the Gazette on the 20 September.

This announced that Ackers would be Colonel, Leigh Philips would be Lieutenant Colonel and Hanson, Major. For the next nine months the matter rested, but prior to the 4 June 1804 it resurfaced dramatically. On this day there was to be a Volunteer review to celebrate the King's birthday. Hanson claimed the command of the brigade and produced correspondence from Lord Derby and the Secretary of State to support his claim. To avoid a public quarrel on the King's birthday Hanson agreed to relinquish temporarily his claim and another officer commanded the brigade for the occasion. Technically Hanson's claim was sound. It rested on the fact that he had

augmented his Rifle Corps after the 3 August by two companies of fifty men each. This enabled him to claim automatic promotion to Lieutenant Colonel, giving him precedence over every other Volunteer Corps in the neighbourhood.

At the time Hobart had indicated to Derby that 'the rank of Lieutenant Colonel has usually been given to persons raising a force of the amount to which Mr Hanson now proposes to augment the Corps under his command'.⁴ Leigh Philips and other officers — Ackers was not involved as his regiment was on permanent duty at Preston — protested immediately to the Secretary of State. They asserted that Hanson's claim 'has been obtained through incorrect representations; otherwise such preference would not have been obtained'. It was, they considered, a degradation ... to which they can on no consideration be induced to submit'.⁵ To their chagrin Lord Hawkesbury for the government upheld Hanson's claim and issued them with a rebuke for 'disputing the authority under which these regulations were made'. Hanson's Corps had been accepted on the 9 August; Leigh Philips and Ackers Corps were not accepted until the 16 August. Hanson had gained seniority by one week. Hawkesbury indicated that if Hanson's fellow officers did not accept the regulations they should resign.

After a protracted wrangle over the interpretation of the regulations, Leigh Philips and the entire officer corps of the First Regiment, comprising fifty-three officers resigned. This led to the eventual collapse of the regiment. Leigh Philips's brother, Francis, observed in a letter, 'I am by no means sorry that Colonel Hanson's ambitious spirit is likely to give us a fair opportunity of laying the whole business before the public'. He added 'I saw Captain Hardwick of Manchester, now of the Army of Reserve, he said that you had been "damned ill-used"'.⁶

No one emerged from the affair with credit. If Hawkesbury's correspondence was undiplomatic, and if Leigh Philips and his colleagues appeared punctilious and pompous, it was the immediate consequence of Hanson's insensitivity and his apparent ambition to command all the local Volunteers. Ackers, Leigh Philips and other officers like James Hibbert and John Atkinson had served in the previous Volunteer structure and had more military experience than Hanson. Hanson may have won the issue on a technicality, but it was at some cost to the Volunteers and to his own popularity. He was unlikely to find many supporters from the Volunteers when he was to clash with the authorities in 1808.

For his own part Hanson considered himself insulted by Leigh Philips's allegations and demanded satisfaction. Philips declined on the grounds that he had a family. Hanson replied that a man should not regard his family as 'a screen for insulting officers with impunity'. Philips then agreed to meet Hanson and arrangements were made for a duel on Kersal Moor on the 28 July 1804. In fact the duel never took place. The magistrates had learned of the affair and dispatched Deputy Constable Joseph Nadin to arrest both men on the moor. Both were later bound over to keep the peace. This was particularly embarrassing to Philips because he was a magistrate himself. Although he had the support of his brother who considered Hanson's conduct could 'merit from you nothing but contempt', Leigh Philips refused to rejoin the Volunteers despite the exhortations of his friends.⁷

For Hanson the affair marked his first collision with Joseph Nadin. Like Hanson, Nadin had amassed a fortune

in the textile trade but came to have a diametrically opposite view of the weaving community. While Hanson was to sympathise and to campaign openly on their behalf, Nadin gained notoriety and eventually the office of Deputy Constable in prosecuting them.

The affair, however, did not jeopardise Hanson's Volunteer activities. Duels involving officers were regrettable, but by no means scandalous or uncommon. Hanson retained his rank and popularity with his own Corps, now titled the 'Manchester Independent Rifle Regiment'. Indeed the Bury and Stockport Rifle and Pike Companies attached to Hanson's Corps declared their support for his exertions to 'maintain the honour of the Corps'. In 1804 his men had presented him with a sword, a brace of pistols, a pike and a saddle. Despite the death of one of his soldiers in an accidental shooting during training at Strangeways Hall in 1805, Hanson seems to have been an efficient and conscientious officer who continued to enjoy the friendship of men like Francis Duckinfield Astley of Duckinfield Hall, later High Sheriff of Cheshire, who entertained Hanson's Corps barely a month after the abortive duel. It was also clear that his Volunteer activities had created some powerful enemies.

In December 1805 Hanson was again involved in controversy. With the threat of a French invasion receding and unlikely in the short-term to be revived after Trafalgar, the Volunteer movement had, in Hanson's opinion, become slack. In a pamphlet, *Brief Remarks on the Present Volunteer Establishment*, Hanson believed that many Volunteer Corps had become forgetful of 'the cause they so solemnly engaged to support'. Inefficient and incompetent corps should be stood down. Parliament should fix the Volunteer establishment, and only those who were willing to maintain their original obligation should remain.

The whole matter of a volunteer militia had been marked by controversy since its inception in 1793. Briefly, there were those who applauded the voluntary principle for home defence and others who condemned the Volunteer movement for diverting manpower from the Army or Navy where they could receive better training. The impossibility of imposing conscription and the suspicion of a large standing army prompted various war-time administrations to balance these conflicting policies. Personnel of Volunteer companies could be raised by ballot or local volunteers could be formed to defend their districts. This had produced a system of varying degrees of efficiency, and much frustration about lack of training and purpose. With the diminishing prospect of invasion the debate intensified.

Hanson was in favour of a local volunteer defence force, but his comments could be employed by those who wished to abolish the system. Instead of confining himself to proposals, Hanson was lavish in criticism. Independent Corps had set 'in general a most unworthy example ... Motives equally frivolous and blameable have rendered them very much the reverse of what was intended when they first offered their services'. There was 'a powerless Command'.⁸

Arguably Hanson's own conduct in July 1804 could be considered 'frivolous and blameable', and it was Leigh Philips who had favoured a more structured command in 1803. It was not surprising that a critic of Hanson's pamphlet condemned it as an invective against 'the generous defenders of this country'. The Volunteers, he argued, could not be in a state of permanent readiness, but

could readily oppose an invasion if it happened. Supporters of Hanson agreed that Bonaparte still constituted a danger and applauded Hanson's view that 'we should have a more permanent force than an army supported by courtesy and liable to reduction from caprice'.⁹ This was in fact the view of the Grenville government after 1806. William Windham, the Secretary for War, was an outspoken critic of the Volunteers. His Commons criticism of them led to 11,000 resignations before he actually abolished the system.

In 1808 Hanson had condemned Windham's 'sarcasms' on the Volunteers, but his own comments on the quality of the force were equally outspoken and possibly contributed to the undermining of the service to which he was still committed. Consequently it was a considerable surprise when in December 1807 Hanson announced his resignation from the Volunteers. To understand this we must now turn to Hanson's evolving political views and his entry into Radical politics.

Hanson and the Preston election 1807

As we have seen, Hanson was not without ambition. While this may have contributed to his political aspirations, it was probably his growing concern about the local economy and the social distress caused by the French War that prompted his decision first to campaign for peace and second to become a parliamentary candidate.

There was considerable local distress in 1807 as a result of the economic warfare being waged by the belligerents via Napoleon's Continental System and Britain's retaliatory Orders-in-Council. The situation was compounded in 1807 with the closure of the United States market to both Britain and France. Until these restrictions were relaxed or trade re-orientated to South America or the Eastern Mediterranean the Lancashire economy would experience considerable difficulties. These developments plus wartime inflation added to an already long standing social problem — the condition of the cotton weavers throughout the region.

Manufacturers had taken advantage of the trade dislocation throughout the war to put work out at any price to weavers who were desperately in need of employment. This meant an enormous stockpiling of goods which could be released onto the market at cut price when demand returned. The glut of goods would also hold wages down to their recession level. On top of this agricultural workers, demobilised soldiers and Irish immigrants all continued to augment the labour force.

In 1807 Hanson organised largely at his own expense a peace petition which was signed by over 40,000 people in various parts of the country. In the same year the weavers were organising a petition for a minimum wage bill which they considered the only means of saving their livelihood.¹⁰ Hanson also made some tentative attempts at securing a parliamentary candidacy first at Chester and then at Stafford where he found the cost prohibitive. Hanson's petitioning activities possibly attracted the attention of the 'The Friends of Independence', a political grouping in Preston. Hanson agreed to become their candidate in the 1807 election. His decision was marked by some irresolution. He did not arrive in Preston until the second day of the campaign in May, and had issued no documents to his constituents. There was apparently some uncertainty about his coming, but he was greeted enthusiastically by a large crowd in Church Street who drew his carriage to the hustings.



The Weaver's friend.

Preston provides a fascinating example of the old aristocratic order's accommodation with the rising industrial forces. Since 1661 the town had an extensive franchise. The right to vote lay with all male inhabitants above 22 with six months residence in the town and no criminal record. Until 1796 the Derby family dominated the town, but then the 'manufacturing interest' challenged this monopoly. They nominated John Horrocks to oppose Lord Stanley. Parliamentary contests were expensive, and the manufacturers could use their power over workers to ensure votes. Consequently the Derbys began to move into the manufacturing sector of the town, purchasing a mill in Church Street in order to obtain a similar ascendancy over the voters.

In 1804 Stanley and Horrocks reached a compromise. As Preston had become a two member constituency an electoral truce was arranged. A key figure in this arrangement was Thomas Butterworth Bayley of Manchester. As Manchester did not have direct parliamentary representation, Bayley and his supporters were anxious to secure influence through Preston. Thus, when John Horrocks died in 1804 his brother Samuel succeeded him as Stanley's partner and continued with the support of the local cotton interest, the Corporation, the government and the Manchester political interests.

The 'coalition' arrangements had worked well for two general elections and was expected to do so again in 1807. Neither Stanley or Horrocks had canvassed the borough, and when they went for nomination to the Town Hall they found to their surprise that Thomas Wilson, a local banker, had proposed Hanson as a candidate thus precipitating a contest. Hanson was therefore upsetting delicate arrangements both in Preston and Manchester.

In his election address on the 6 May Hanson promised that 'every effort shall be made to promote your Commercial



Horwich Weavers' cottages, note the large cellars.

Interest, and to advantage those whose industry is so essential to the Support and Prosperity of the British Empire. I will defend the Rights of the Crown, and the Privileges of the People'.¹¹ During the campaign Hanson attended a meeting of weavers at the Green Man Inn. He announced that he would give every possible support to the weaver's minimum wage bill.¹² This was no empty electoral pledge. In July 1807, over a month after the Preston campaign, Hanson received a weaver's delegate, Thomas Sparling of Walton, at Strangeways Hall. Hanson reaffirmed his support for the bill and donated £50 to the weavers' fund to cover the expenses of the petition.¹³

The minimum wage bill had featured prominently in the campaign. The weavers' delegates, Thomas Thorp and Richard Needham, were anxious to refute Horrock's assertion that he was sympathetic to the weavers. 'When in London we waited upon him, at his request, and were treated with the greatest contempt and ridicule'. For his part, Hanson declared that he would 'never desert the men, who live by the fruits of their labour'. The polling took place over twelve days and did produce several affrays and the death of one man. The candidates issued a joint appeal for moderation, but an 'old elector' considered that there had been 'scenes of riot, confusion, drunkenness and idleness' throughout the campaign.¹⁴

How far the 'Friends of Independence' expected to actually dislodge one of the sitting members is hard to say. Hanson had impressed upon the electors 'the absolute necessity of overthrowing a system, as insulting to its object, as painful to the feelings of every independent elector'.¹⁵ While the entrenched system survived, Hanson's supporters could take some satisfaction from the result: Stanley 1619; Horrocks 1616; Hanson 1001. His challenge to the 'coalition' was impressive in comparison with the performances of the subsequent opposition candidates between 1812 and the eventual defeat of the 'coalition' by Henry Hunt in 1830. Hanson in fact received 64% of the weavers' vote in Preston, thus justifying his later sobriquet 'the Weaver's Friend'.¹⁶ His total of 1001 was painted on the corner of streets and remained for years after the contest was forgotten.¹⁷

Hanson denounced the 'infamous conduct' of those employers who had dismissed their workers for voting for him, and promised to stand again. The system of open voting had to a large degree neutralised the wide franchise and enabled the 'men of opulence' to exert influence over

'the number of individuals employed in their works, and from whom the various trades-people look to for support'.

Inevitably Hanson's candidacy produced the criticism that, as he had no connection with Preston, his interference was mischievous. He should instead have been concerned with the preservation of social order and improving the conditions of his 'socially inferiors':

*In suffering yourself to be set up as a candidate for the Borough of Preston, you have been the cause of the greatest disorder and disturbance in the town, and a greater enemy to the lower classes of the inhabitants, than their present intemperate zeal will allow them to discover. ... The party from which your hope arise, has no other object but to create disturbance.*¹⁸

These sentiments would no doubt have been shared by Hanson's opponents in Manchester where he was still engaged in organising the peace petition.

Manchester and the Peace Petitions 1807 — 1808

On the 21 November 1807 Hanson wrote to the Boroughreeve of Manchester requesting permission to hold a meeting to raise a petition for peace. He argued that there could be negotiated peace with France if Britain agreed to relinquish Malta. Do not Ministers, he warned, 'too frequently calculate from the ease with which they can raise loans, and from the alliance of the people, that all is prosperity and happiness when, in fact, it is directly to the contrary?' Hanson pointed to the depressed state of Manchester, Preston, Wigan, Bolton and Stockport and concluded, 'Peace is the only remedy. To wait for peace is only going to create universal misery'.¹⁹

In the face of accusations of disloyalty and hypocrisy and courting the popularity of the people for his own political ends, Hanson announced his resignation from the Volunteers on the 11 December 1807. He had faced 'unmerited calumny' in his attempts to promote peace and, not wishing to disunite the Regiment, he was 'under the painful necessity' of sending his resignation to the government. There was, however, local support for peace negotiations. On the 19 March 1808 Colonel Stanley presented a petition to parliament 'from a great number of manufacturers at Manchester against the Orders-in-Council'. Hanson's role, if any, in this transaction is not clear, but the petitioners' condemnation of the prolongation of the war and the urgent need for honourable negotiations reflected his sentiments exactly. On the 22 March Lord Auckland presented a petition to the Upper House from 'Merchants and Manufacturers in Manchester', protesting against the closure of the American trade.²⁰

Opinion in the city was clearly divided because in the same month an Address signed by 190 Manchester citizens was sent to the King condemning petitioning for peace as 'unnecessary' and 'mischievous'. Petitions 'may perplex and embarrass the deliberations of parliament. They may embolden our enemy. They may lead him to imagine that we are a divided people at a crisis when it is most necessary that we should be unanimous. They may induce him to raise his demands ... A 'Petition for Peace at the present juncture is, in effect, A Petition for Prolonging the War'.²¹ Among the signatories were John Leigh Philips, James Ackers and the Boroughreeve, William Starkie.

If the charge of 'perplexing' parliament, strengthening the enemy and giving the appearance of disunity were made against Hanson, they could with equal justice have been made against the signatories of the Royal Address. In February 1804, when the prospect of invasion had been more likely than in 1807, the merchants and manufacturers of Manchester had called a public meeting to demand a repeal of the Cotton Arbitration Act. They reconstituted a committee which had been formed to resist the enlargement of the powers of the Act, entered into communication with other towns, appointed delegates to a Commons committee and spent £2,031 on lobbying.²² There was little thought here for unity in a crisis.

Hanson's critics were not slow to remind him how he had changed his position. He had been formerly a strong supporter of the war and encouraged others to support it. In 1807 he was now saying the war had no definite object and was 'most oppositely, inconsistently and prematurely' demanding that it should be ended. Hanson had indeed been an enthusiastic supporter of the war between 1803 and 1805, but he denied any inconsistency. Previously, he claimed, it had not been possible to obtain an honourable peace, now it was possible.

Hanson discussed his reasons in a pamphlet, *A Defence of the Petitions for Peace* which, by February 1808, had gone into a third edition. The pamphlet is very revealing. It not only indicated the progression of Hanson's political views, but can be viewed as one of the earliest examples of the 'Manchester School'. It stands in a category with Cobden's pamphlets *1793 and 1853* which illustrated the futility of the Revolutionary Wars and *What Next and Next* which discussed the Crimean War. Like these publications, Hanson's received a controversial reception.

In an opening phrase which Cobden and Bright would have applauded, Hanson wrote: 'To advocate the cause of Peace, Humanity and Justice is, in the language of the defenders of war, to disseminate sedition, and to support the enemy'. After criticising the Westminster parties for prolonging the war for their political advantage and thus leaving Britain isolated diplomatically, Hanson developed a theme that was to preoccupy a future generation of reformers — the insensitivity of a landed parliament to the emerging industrial sector. 'Most of their property is in counties devoted to agriculture; they have a very incorrect idea of the nature of trade, which from their cradles they have been taught to despise'.

Hanson denied that petitions gave encouragement to the enemy by acknowledging economic distress. The French knew of this already, and to procrastinate further on peace talks would result in Britain negotiating from weakness.

Weavers' cottages at Milnrow.



Bonaparte was secure in Europe and would in time increase his navy. Negotiations would not involve the sacrifice of national honour or encourage disaffection. Hanson's conclusion revealed the extent of his radicalism:

*If the nobility, clergy, bank and East India directors, stock jobbers, the gentlemen at Lloyds, and those who live by the folly, vice and plunder of the public, feel the smallest part of the actual misery that I know is felt by the petitioners whose cause I defend ... then negotiations would be opened in Downing Street or Paris immediately.*²³

As Hanson pointed out, the right to petition parliament remained unaffected by the war. However, the legislation passed by Pitt in 1795 extending the law of treason and regulating public meetings had resulted in the practical extinction of petitioning. Employers, as the Cotton Arbitration Act illustrated, could engage in such activity. Workers, conversely, were liable to face the legislation of 1795 and, after 1800, the Combination Acts.

Hanson for his part experienced two major handicaps. After his controversial career in the Volunteers, and his participation in the Preston election, he was alienated from a considerable body of his own class. Secondly, Hanson apparently made no attempt to coordinate his political activities in Manchester with friends like Francis Astley, William Nabb, Joseph Kershaw and Thomas Appleby with whom he had mercantile, Volunteer and Church associations. Indeed as his speeches and writing suggest, Hanson considered, like Cobbett, his strength lay in his solitary integrity. Inevitably this exposed him to the charge that his appeal would be 'to the indigent, who are always inflammable; to the weak, who are naturally suspicious; to the ignorant, who are easily misled; and to the profligate, who have no hope but from mischief and confusion'.²⁴

In this context Hanson's resignation from the Volunteers was seen as a device to court the popularity of these groups. In fact the resignation possibly reflected a naive conception of the Volunteer's role and resentment at personal criticism. In 1804 in a speech to his Corps Hanson remarked: 'I may perhaps be forgiven if I briefly remind you of our object when we first associated as Volunteers; it was no less the defence of our blessed Sovereign — our native soil — and all that is valuable to us in existence'.²⁵ Hanson regarded the Volunteers as a home defence force to repulse invaders. His resignation letter in 1807 indicated that he would still be prepared to rejoin his comrades to 'act against either foreign or domestic enemies (although of the latter I believe there are none)'.²⁶ For many magistrates and Volunteer commanders the 'domestic enemies' were the very people Hanson was supporting.

The Volunteer Corps had never been intended solely as a counter-invasion force. It was also in fact a counter-revolutionary one. The French Wars had a tendency to fuse the propertied classes and the traditionalists into a strong 'party of order'. The formation of the Volunteers after 1793 had been central to this process. They provided a rallying cry to resist invasion, and were also an instrument of propaganda and a means of defending the existing order. In fact many Volunteer Corps were formed specifically to keep in restraint some locally suspect groups — Radicals, or demonstrators against the high price of corn, or, simply, the unemployed. In Inverness they had been used to put down meal riots; in Buckinghamshire they protected the grain trade.²⁷ In

Stockport they were deployed against the weavers in 1808. Hanson's resignation had blamed the 'unmerited calumny' on his character. He may also have realised that, in a period of increasing distress and social tension in Manchester, which must now be considered, he may well have been ordered to use his Corps against the weaving community whose cause he had championed so publically.

The St. George's Fields Meeting

On the 19 May 1809 the weavers' minimum wage bill was rejected by the Commons. The news reached Manchester on the 22nd. On the 23rd, a large meeting of weavers had taken place in Stockport and two troops of horse were sent from Manchester to disperse it. On the 24th, about 6,000 weavers assembled on St. George's Fields Manchester. The Fields occupied the area on each side of the present Rochdale Road, from just behind Miller Street and Swan Street. The purpose of the meeting was not just to protest against the loss of the minimum wage bill, but to renew their demand for a 33.1% wage increase. Average wages for a six day week of 14 or 15 hours per day then stood at 7 or 8 shillings.

The magistrates and 'several respectable gentlemen' urged the crowd to go home. When they refused, the Riot Act was read although no riot had taken place. Several detachments of dragoons and local constables then cleared the field. Several people were arrested but there were no injuries. Two corps of Volunteers were in readiness but were not deployed.

The following day an even larger crowd assembled on St. George's Fields, possibly reaching 15,000 by the afternoon. The proceedings were orderly. A square was formed in the middle of the Fields in which members of the respective weavers committees met. They dispatched delegates to the Boroughreeve and principal officers of the town and requested them to use their influence with the manufacturers to raise their wages. In the crowd *The Times* correspondent 'listened attentively and learned tales of the most distressing scenes that ever human eye has witness to'.²⁸ The delegates returned about 3 pm to announce failure, but told the crowd to remain firm in their cause and to remain peaceful and orderly.

At this point, with nerves fraying on both sides, violence did occur. Two boys threw dirt at a dragoon. When running away they were fired at. A man standing in a doorway with his wife and five children was fatally wounded. The discipline of the crowd held and the dragoons, to demonstrate their regret, subsequently took up a collection for the man's family.

Joseph Hanson viewed the St. George's Fields demonstrations with increasing unease. So far he had confined his support to the distribution of bread, anonymously, in Middleton and Pendlebury. He had not gone to the Fields on Tuesday, but by Wednesday he decided to do so. He explained to his friends Nabb, Kershaw and Appleby that he regretted that the weavers had assembled and that he would use his influence to get them to disperse peacefully.

This was a rash decision. Hanson should have recognised that his very appearance on the Fields might actually produce disorder or, at the very least, leave him open to criticism from his numerous enemies. Hanson after all had been a teenager when the Manchester 'Church and King' mob had attacked the property of Thomas Walker and other radicals in December 1792, and in April 1794 they had secured their prosecution at Lancaster. Walker, like

Hanson, was considered a renegade and, although acquitted, he had been financially ruined.²⁹ If Hanson wanted to use his influence prudently, it would have been better to have invited the weavers' delegates to Strangeways Hall which was only a mile and a quarter from St. George's Fields.

At twenty minutes to four *The Times* correspondent saw 'a gentleman enter the square on the Fields on horseback, who harangued the unfortunate people'. The correspondent was unable to hear Hanson's speech to the crowd, and it was the alleged contents which led to Hanson's prosecution. Hanson approached Lieutenant Trafford of the 4th Dragoon Guards and requested permission to speak to the crowd. Trafford felt that this would not be helpful and told Hanson to leave the field. Hanson apparently disregarded this and addressed the crowd. According to the prosecution witnesses — a sergeant and two corporals of the 4th Dragoons and two of Joseph Nadin's constables — Hanson had said :

*Your cause is good, and I will support you as far as £3,000; stick to your cause ... Neither Nadin or his faction shall put you off the field today ... My father was a weaver. I myself was brought up to that trade. I am your real friend ... be steady and stick to your purpose; but do not disturb the tranquility of the country.*³⁰

Conversely Hanson maintained that his words were :

*I would advise you to be steady, and stick to your purpose, and you will gain your ends; but, for God's sake, do not disturb the tranquility of the country.*³¹

The pressure of the crowd had in fact alarmed Hanson's horse, forcing him to dismount. He spoke to the crowd again before exchanging horses with his groom, John Seddon, and returning to Strangeways Hall. At all times he stated he was within earshot of the troops and did not use 'malicious and inflammatory words'.

The following day he issued a statement explaining his conduct and protesting about being 'basely calumniated'. He had no idea his presence 'would produce the sensation it did'. He was publicly committed to the weavers' bill, but he had uttered no words to inflame the situation. He had every right to appear publicly to endeavour to appease popular discontent. 'Am I the man to create, with what every humane and sensible man must deprecate, civil commotion?'.³² Paradoxically such expressions of injured innocence served only to convince Hanson's opponents that he was 'an artful and designing man'.

As we have remarked, Hanson stood trial at Lancaster for a misdemeanour in his support of the Manchester weavers in their 'conspiracy' to raise their wages. The outcome of the trial can be better appreciated in the context of the weavers' struggle which continued in Manchester and the county while Hanson's prosecution was being prepared.

After the dispersal of the St. George's Fields' demonstration the military then scoured the countryside, breaking up weavers' meetings in Blackley, White Moss, Middleton and Kersal Moor. As a result the weavers changed tactics and employed intimidation. Weavers were prevented from working in the city and those who tried to bring their goods in from the neighbourhood were challenged. The strike was well organised by, it was thought, a secret committee. In an attempt to locate this committee local constables and three companies of the West Yorks Militia raided a public house in Newton

Street. Thirty-seven weavers were arrested. By the 7 June the strike appeared to be weakening.³³

The authorities took no chances. 'Troops are pouring into Manchester from all quarters, though the town is perfectly tranquil'.³⁴ The position, however, afterwards worsened. On the 22 June the weavers met again on St. George's Fields and appeared more determined than ever to continue the dispute. Prominent manufacturers were burned in effigy and many goods were destroyed by spirit of vitriol or aquafortis sprayed on the looms via a syringe squirted through broken windows. Trouble had also spread to the surrounding districts. In Rochdale striking cotton weavers demolished the House of Correction, released prisoners from the new jail and burned it to the ground. A meeting of Bolton weavers was broken up by troops who 'dispersed them in every direction, pursuing several of them for 3 or 4 miles upon the Moor which is close by the town'.³⁵ By July the weavers were forced to return to work on a staged 20% increase instead of the 31% they had wanted. Significantly when the weavers had urged the minimum wage bill in 1806 the Manchester businessmen did not mount the same level of campaign as they had against the Arbitration Act. The manufacturers' committee decided merely to correspond with members of parliament. They had perhaps recognised that starvation would provide the ultimate arbitration in the wage dispute.

The weavers' struggle and Hanson's role within it should also be understood in the context of Manchester's evolving economy. From 1800 Manchester was making a bid for the economic supremacy of the region. 'It was at the very centre of manufacturing and finishing, and it was drawing to it foreign buyers, as well as drapers and dealers from a wide area, who had reduced their activities at the warehouses and markets in the smaller textile towns'.³⁶ The war had enabled wage stagnation and enormous stockpiling. The politics of peace was not just a question of patriotism or the lack of it. Manchester was determined to face the economic consequences of peace on its own terms. If Peterloo, in 1819, was to be a dramatic attempt by the city to arrest radicalism in the region, then the earlier less well known industrial struggles of the war years had been a series of attritional campaigns to assert the city's economic dominance. The young Samuel Bamford had noticed the beginnings of this process in the 1790s when he remarked that, 'The two classes of workmen and employer were already at too great a distance from each other, and it was subject to observation that the masters were becoming more and more proud and uplifted each day'.³⁷

Hanson's trial and after

Against this background and Hanson's own impetuosity the outcome of his trial was predictable. He experienced three major handicaps. The first was that the trial dealt only with events on St. George's Fields. Hanson was therefore unable to state his reasons for going there. Character references could only be submitted in the form of affidavits in mitigation after the verdict was reached. Second, the counsel for the defence, Raine, was unable to coordinate his witnesses so that the prosecution could point to gaps and inconsistencies in their testimony.

Interestingly neither side called any weavers to the stand. Although as Hanson remarked later: 'If I had produced a thousand such, some vacancy in the transaction, some point of time unaccounted for, would have left an opening for those observations which were so liberally employed against me'.³⁸ The third handicap Hanson faced was the

simplicity of the prosecution case: if Hanson had gone to the Fields for the purposes of maintaining order, why did he not cooperate with the magistrates and the military? Moreover, Cockell, the prosecuting counsel, in his opening and closing remarks reminded the jury of the public, or political, aspects of the trial:

*To convict men in humble situation will effect but little good, but when I have brought before you a man of wealth, of great property ... such example will be of real use; it will do more good than the conviction of 10,000 poor.*³⁹

The jury took only a few moments to return a verdict of guilty.

When the sentence of six months and fine of £100 was confirmed at the Court of King's Bench in May Hanson was treated to a remarkable discourse on orthodox political economy by Mr Justice Grose. Workers could always move to other better paid employment; high wages in any case 'often promote intemperance and idleness'. Hanson had abused his 'rank and station'. Even if he had gone to the demonstration to advise order: 'Men with rebellion in their hearts, occasionally use words like you, recommending peace, order, tranquility and obedience to the law'.⁴⁰ In essence Hanson was being punished for his very presence among the weavers no matter what words he had actually used.

Immediately the weavers in Manchester and the country announced that they would subscribe to pay Hanson's fine. He declined their offer, but to mark their appreciation, and to express their contempt for the verdict, 39,600 people subscribed instead to a silver cup which was presented to Hanson in prison by a weavers' delegation. Hanson had advised against a public ceremony on his release 'should evilly disposed persons use the event to disturb the public tranquility'. After his release Hanson returned to Manchester on the 15 November 1809. The previous day a handbill circulated in the city appealing to 'the friends of Peace and Humanity' to assemble 'as orderly as possible' at Ardwick Green to meet him. It was urged that 'a sprig of Evergreen', the emblem of Reform, be worn 'in the Hat or Breast'. Many who went to St. Peter's Fields in August 1819 wore the same emblem.

In fact an immense crowd of weavers greeted Hanson five miles beyond Macclesfield and his carriage was drawn through the town by the crowd. When he reached Stockport the same thing occurred. 'Preceded by an excellent band of music, colours flying etc, the population drew him from thence to the top of Manchester Hill'. Hanson then proceeded to Manchester amidst crowds who literally lined the road from Stockport to Strangeways Hall.⁴¹

Unlike Henry Hunt, Hanson showed no inclination to capitalise on his enormous popularity and seemingly wished to avoid controversy. Perhaps too he had no wish to confront once again the power of Deputy Constable Nadin, 'the Napoleon of parish officers' who, by 1810, was firmly and lucratively ensconced in the city administration. The weavers had been defeated and divided over the July 1809 outcome, and with the recurrence of trade recession in 1811, their conditions deteriorated further. Now, however, they resorted again to petitioning rather than violence. Over 40,000 signatures were collected in Manchester and 7,000 in Bolton. Spencer Perceval's government agreed to establish a Commons select committee to satisfy the weavers 'that

every attention has been paid to their claim by that House'.⁴² It was in this context that Hanson made his last service to the weavers. Their committee, representing 36,104 people, asked Hanson to give evidence to the select committee on their behalf.

It was in fact a perfunctory inquiry with only a small number of witnesses. Indeed Hanson's low standing with the authorities may have made him something of a liability. Nonetheless he provided the melancholy statistic that 12,000 weavers were working in the Manchester area for 11 shillings per week when fully employed. The select committee rejected completely the weaver's proposals for a limitation on the number of apprentices, a ban on mechanical improvements or a direct financial grant from the Treasury.

Instead, like Hanson at the King's Bench, the weavers were treated to a lecture on political economy. Such proposals were out of the question 'without establishing the most pernicious precedent; or even without aggravating after a short time the general distress'.⁴³ For a backbench M.P. the remedy was simple. The weavers could either 'work at lower prices, or employ their labour in some other manner'.⁴⁴ The weavers for their part offered Hanson 'their highest approbation and most grateful thanks' and regretted that their 'indigent and

present distress' prevented a more substantial token of thanks.⁴⁵

So the weavers were to struggle on to their eventual demise, and so too was Joseph Hanson. Whether he would in fact have ever stood again in Preston will never be known. The St. George's Fields incident and his subsequent imprisonment had evidently impaired his health. In his final public appearance in early September 1811 his friends observed that 'the hand of mortality was strongly imprinted on his frame'. He was suffering from a dropsical complaint and liver disorder.

He died on the 7 September 1811, and was buried in the family grave at the Unitarian Chapel, Stand, Whitefield. He was 37. His funeral was largely ignored by those newspapers who had been hostile to him. It was as if they wished to exclude Hanson, the renegade manufacturer, from posterity. As Prentice remarked, Hanson was 'an impulsively benevolent man who had not the knowledge requisite to make him a very useful working man's friend'.⁴⁶ This is perhaps a little harsh. Hanson does deserve better of history. As the words on his memorial tablet in the Stand burial ground remark, Hanson's career will 'remind those who live in happier times of one who in darker days loved his fellow men'.

NOTES

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