

OpenLearn documentary

CHATTERTON: Riot, Fight or Massacre?

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Almost exactly 200 years ago, this picturesque village of Chatterton was the site of one of the most contested moments in British industrial history. On the 26th April 1826, 20 soldiers from the 60th Duke of York Own Rifles and 15 Queen Bay Cavalrymen fired somewhere between 400-600 bullets into a crowd of 3,000 anti-starvation protestors.

At least six people – James Lord, John Ashworth, Richard Lund, James Rothwell, Mary Simpson and James Waddicar - were shot dead by soldiers and several others seriously wounded. No one knows for sure the exact numbers of those who died – newspapers reported that 3 more bodies were found in the woods the following day and the names of those who may have later died of their wounds have never been recorded.

Only seven years after the infamous Peterloo Massacre, 16th August, 1819, the indiscriminate deaths Chatterton were for a long time a kind of historical secret, lost to public memory.

In this documentary we explain what happened on the 26th April 1826 and how the Chatterton Massacre was hidden in plain sight for two centuries.

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Following many years of declining living standards, and then the December 1825 Panic, which resulted in widespread unemployment, the working-class communities of Lancashire were facing a real threat of mass starvation. One of the hardest hit industries was the textile trade, and especially handloom weavers, who made up a significant proportion of the workers in Pennine Lancashire.

After suffering a harsh winter from 1825-1826 people of were desperate. They had no direct political representation and over many years had tried to have their voice heard – petitions, letters to employers, governments and newspapers, and even strikes.

They expected that if they worked hard that they would have a decent standard of living. In 1826 these expectations had been thwarted.

When faced with the threat of mass starvation, and with no other way available to them, in April 1826 tens of thousands of people across Pennine Lancashire rose up and engaged in the targeted destruction of power looms.

Over 4 days, from the 24th-27th April 1826, more than 1,100 power looms were destroyed.

Protests continued for a further 6 days in Manchester and Yorkshire. The uprising was received with trepidation by politicians, anxiety and fear by local mill owners, and brutal repression by the legal authorities.

The bloodiest confrontation between the protestors and those enforcing the law came on the 3rd day of the uprising, at a small village called Chatterton.

Riot?

The reading of the 1714 *Riot Act* was a common occurrence in Britain the 1820s. The *Riot Act* was read by a local magistrate to end a 'riotous assembly – 'a crowd of 12 or more people who, for whatever reason, now had 1 hour to disperse. The *Riot Act* did not mean people were engaging in illegalities or property destruction.

During the 1826 uprising it is believed that William Grant read the Riot Act whilst protestors were on their way to Aitkins Mill. Reading the Riot Act was important. Once read, what followed could legally be called a riot. This meant that long as the military acted in ways necessary, they could shoot protestors dead. And that property owners could claim compensation for damages.

The indiscriminate killings at Chatterton were for many years referred to as the “Chatterton Riot”.

However, to refer to what happened at Chatterton is a riot is misleading.

Archival work into the inquest testimonies and legal depositions, indicate widespread shock amongst residents – including mill owner Thomas Aitkin – at the brutality of the soldiers. Evidence into the deaths of Mary Simpson and James Waddicar were particularly damning. Both victims were bystanders. Waddicar was shot dead after most of the crowd had been dispersed.

To call something a riot has several consequences. First it obscures the motivations of the protestors – to send a symbolic message about their fears of mass starvation. Second it places blame firmly onto the actions of the protestors – implying chaotic violence on the part of the protestors when actually the violence was perpetrated by soldiers. Third there is nothing in the word riot that implies that at least six people were indiscriminately shot dead.

Fight?

Calling this event the “Chatterton Riot” faces on final devastating objection. Eyewitnesses at the time claimed magistrate William Grant never actually read the *Riot Act*! Even legally, it is unclear if it was a “riot”

If the *Riot Act* was not read then protests would be referred to as an “affray” – in other words a fight. This adds further doubt to the claim that what happened was the “Chatterton Riot”

However, calling the indiscriminate killings of unarmed civilians after soldiers had shot hundreds bullets into a crowd a “fight” obscures what happened. A “fight” implies equality of arms – when in reality, at most, protestors only threw stones. This is no match for bullets, sabres and bayonets. Only two soldiers suffered minor injuries.

Massacre?

Our third alternative is to call what happened at Chatterton a massacre. There are three definitional criteria for a massacre:

- At least six people were indiscriminately killed from the same group of protestors within a very limited time-period.
- All victims were non-combatants who died from a direct physical intervention by soldiers or cavalrymen.
- All of those who killed were defenceless and did not present a real threat to the lives of the soldiers.

As all three conditions were met on 26th April, 1826. Chatterton is one of Britains hidden massacre.

There undoubtedly was a cover up at the time. Even though eyewitnesses could identify the soldier who shot James Wadicar, the army prevented identification. The 60th Duke of York Own Rifles were soon sent to Portugal. No press was allowed to attend the inquests. The early inquest testimonies, such as those by Betty Upton and John Platt, expressed horror at the soldiers uncontrollable and chaotic violence.

Following an adjournment magistrate James Watkins orchestrated testimonies to focus on the necessity of state violence. Despite these claims, there were no criminal prosecutions of anyone involved at Chatterton at the Lancaster Assize courts in August / September 1826.

Since 2021, people have started to refer to what happened at Chatterton as a massacre. Local residents, local and national media, heritage sites, unions, artists and campaigners have all adopted the language of massacre.

What happened at Chatterton on 26th April 1826 must be remembered as a massacre. There are no other words that can describe it.