

The Chartists in Steeple Ashton

Chartism was a movement for political and social reform which started in 1838 and continued for the next 20 years until 1859.

It takes its name from the People's Charter of 1838 which contained six points: manhood suffrage; the ballot; abolition of property qualifications for MPs; payment of MPs; equal electoral districts; and annual elections. Thousands of working people rallied together on the basis of this charter, and hundreds of them went to prison for their beliefs.

Initially the chartists attracted much Radical middle-class support but they were soon put off by the associated ideas of social change and what they saw as the threat of mob rule. Chartist meetings drew large crowds until they were made illegal.

In 1839 William Carrier, the Trowbridge Chartist leader, became increasingly militant and went around the local area addressing meetings.

The Devizes Gazette reported:

You can scarcely depict it in to vivid colours the dreadful, demoralised and disorganised state of the working classes of this town (Trowbridge). They have broken the church window, once even while the Rector was performing a service.....they have drawn large sums from their benefit societies and are provided generally with arms such as pistols, muskets etc. A druggist even had the temerity to exhibit a great heap of bullets in his window, labelled "Pills for the Tories!".....

The women are particularly violent and outrageous. Scarcely any of the workpeople in the factories but contribute, some secretly but most openly to the Chartist Association. They have infected Holt, Bradley, Steeple Ashton etc and all the surrounding villages and no person with a decent coat on his back can be seen without being hooted and insulted. The special constables are afraid to act and the trade in the town is seriously injured. The children are paraded about with banners bearing mottoes "Liberty or death!" "We want justice!" "We will have our rights!" The children of the British school joined the procession in a body. They also, on another occasion locked out their master and show every mark of total insubordination. The chapels are much thinned on Sundays, so are the Sunday schools and the people instead attend Carrier's lectures or read Vincent's newspaper. (The National Vindicator, published in Bath)

It is reported that William Carrier was presented with a silk scarf by the married ladies of Trowbridge at a mass meeting held on 30 September 1838. He also attended a meeting "on a white charger, and dealt out the most unmeasured invectives against the Government"

In May, the following year, William Carrier arranged a Chartist meeting in Steeple Ashton, a small gathering of local people came to listen to him. **Thomas Miles** was the tenant of Manor Farm. The following day when on the heard that some of his men had attended the meeting, his immediate reaction was to dismiss them all, later he took one back. The dismissed workers assembled themselves and threatened to pull down Thomas Miles's cottage. William Carrier returned and urged the workers to buy muskets to arm themselves.

Later a fire occurred on Miles's property for which the Chartists were blamed. This is the newspaper account;

1839 May 12th Devizes Gazette.

Dreadful Fire at Steeple Ashton

At about 12 o'clock last night, fire was discovered issuing from a barn belonging to Mr Miles of Steeple Ashton. The barn was considered to be the largest in Wiltshire and contained a quantity of stubble and straw.

It was soon in a blaze and the sparks communicating to the wheat ricks in the barton, the fire extended itself and presented a scene scarcely to be described. The result is 4 wheat ricks, 3 wagons laden with

straw, 2 carts and several implements of husbandry were entirely consumed together with 3 cottage houses and several other cottages greatly injured.

At one time fears were entertained that the whole of the village would be burnt down. Whilst the fire was at its height there was an awful storm of thunder and lightening. Mr Miles was from home at the time the fire broke out. There is not the least doubt the fire was caused by an incendiary and it is supposed that the barn and one of the cottage houses were set on fire at the same time. A fellow named **Bishop*** is in custody on suspicion.

It was also reported in other papers:

The fire was seen at a distance of 10 to 15 miles.

The cottagers half naked were engaged in removing their little articles of furniture

It is stated that in no part of Wiltshire are the labourers better paid or altogether better off than they are in Steeple Ashton.

Mr Miles was from home being on duty as one of the cavalry.

William Carrier was later charged with sedition and found guilty of:

"Assembling at and addressing unlawful and seditious meetings to excite to hatred of the Government and Constitution and in contempt of the laws." His was sentenced to two years hard labour at the County House of Corrections, Devizes.

* No further information.