

1831

RIOT!

**An interactive play for voices**

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2004

**BACKGROUND**

It's 1831, the year of the Queen Square riots, and only a small privileged minority of the population of Great Britain have the vote. You have to be male, landed and of the gentry. Since about 1766 there have been moves for "Reform" – to enfranchise more of the population and do away with the so-called 'rotten boroughs'. Its proponents are emboldened by other events such as the July 1830 revolution in France, which led to the accession of Louis Phillippe as constitutional monarch, and, here in England, the accession of William IV (the bloke on the horse still to be found in Queen Square to this day) in 1830, the year before the riots. 'The people' have the expectation of Reform and want to believe the new King supports them.

So, when at the end of October 1831, Sir Charles Wetherell, the official Recorder for Bristol, who represented Bristol in Parliament, arrived in Bristol to open the Assizes, the stage was set for confrontation. You see, bonny Sir Charles (who actually had his own rotten borough up in Yorkshire, so no way did he want Reform) had the temerity to assure Parliament that Bristolians were against Reform. So, in the spirit of the times, he was all set for being barracked, pelted, hissed and boo'd at. Which was duly delivered.

Ah, another thing – in those far off days, oh best beloved, the civil authorities' means of crowd control were not as well developed as they are nowadays. The Corporation of Bristol, for example, had a small body of standing, paid constables, but if there were 'trouble at mill' they co-opted 'decent upstanding citizens', tradespeople of the realm etc into the constabulary; gave them a stave and a white armband and sent them off to keep proper order.

Ah, there were, of course, the 'Tory bludgeon men': a rough mob renowned for getting stuck in and doing your dirty work for you.

Um, if none of this worked then you might think, ‘just call in the Cavalry’, the Dragoons, and they’ll make mincemeat of the rioters and that’ll be that. But it wasn’t that simple. Firstly, you had the Riot Act, which had to be read three times by a magistrate in order for it to be effected (and a common defence in Court was, ‘beg pardon, your Worship, but I ain’t never heard it read’); then you had doubts about when, where, why and how to read and implement the Riot Act anyway. Even the Lawlords, never mind your common magistrates and justices, were not too sure on this point. And, make no mistake, if you, as the military commanding officer, commanded your troops in to hack at citizens, you had to have pretty damn good legal authority to do so, or it might well be your neck in the noose, not the rioters’.

So when we look at the riot, we have to imagine all these things going around in the heads of both the civil authorities (the Mayor and Corporation) and the military authorities; like, “er, when is a riot a riot? Is this a riot yet or is it just letting off steam?” and, “will I get court-martialled if I order the troops in?” and “er, I actually think the mob may have a point – but I’d better not let on ...” and, “I’m covering me own back, mate – you give the orders!”

What else have we? The Corporation of Bristol, headed up by Mayor Charles Pinney, who was in the ‘West India trade’ and had inherited Caribbean plantations and the Bristol sugar business of his father John Pinney, Esquire. The Corporation was none too popular, either with the lower or growing middle classes. Like all Corporations it was self-elected, self-serving, and answerable only to itself. It had badly botched the Bristol Bridge Riots some years previously (innocent citizens slaughtered by troops) and wasn’t dealing too well with the long-running Tollgate trashings and the feared Kingswood Miners. And all this, of course, was set against the background of a decline in Bristol’s fortunes compared to its perpetual rivals, Liverpool and London (for the pickings of the Slave Trade amongst others).

So, Wetherell arrived, was duly pelted etcetera, the Assizes had to be postponed because of continual interruptions, and he, the Mayor and assorted Aldermen and dignitaries retired to the Mansion House in Queen Square for the grand dinner. The crowd continued protesting outside. Perhaps things would have quietened down, but the

aforementioned 'Tory bludgeon men' decided, or were ordered, to make 'seek and destroy' forays into the crowd, dragging people back into the Mansion House and duffing them up. This, naturally, inflamed the crowd, who responded by going to the Back to pick up faggots (big sticks), then pressing home an attack on the Mansion House.

The troops? Oh, their commanding officer, Colonel Brereton, only had 93 men and he was convinced, anyway, that the crowd would calm down eventually and go home.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, once the protesters had broken into the Mansion House they found the cellars stocked with best quality brandy, gin, rum and other spirits. So from then on the Riot really went with a swing. Brereton, well, he "never could obtain from the Magistrates those precise and specific orders which, in his judgement, were necessary to enable him to take measures of more determined violence" ie tell the troops to sort it out – ah, but we have to remember, he didn't have enough of them anyway.

It wasn't all hack, loot and burn, oh no. The rioters hauled a piano out of the Mansion House and played the Moonlight Sonata and country dances on it. The rioters danced, drank, auctioned off looted property, behaved 'in a depraved manner' and generally had a party. Others organised themselves and went off liberating the prisoners from all three local gaols. Brereton and Mayor Pinney were engaged in a complicated dance all of their own, each trying to get the other to take responsibility for sorting things out – Brereton was playing 'hunt the magistrate' and the magistrates were playing 'hide from Brereton'; the middle classes were egging the rioters on, because they didn't like the Corporation ... a merry dance indeed.

But then it got serious – first the Mansion House was fired – not an unusual circumstance, it must be said, it'd been burnt down umpteen times before in other riots – then the rioters progressed to sacking and burning other Corporation property. Fine ... but then they moved on to private citizens' properties: houses, warehouses, pubs, businesses; and settling old scores etc. Um, not so good.

Granted, they did, initially, give warning, you know, "excuse the interruption, madam, but we're going to burn down your house. If you

don't want to burn with it, we'd be much obliged if you should vacate the premises within, oh, 20 minutes? Good day." Soon there was complete chaos, with up to two-thirds of this immense square in flames, the 'wailing and moaning of lost souls', rioters trapped in burning buildings, under fallen walls or in molten lead, 'which ran like water off the roofs'.

Brereton, in the meantime, had withdrawn the 14<sup>th</sup> Dragoons (The Bloody Blues) to Keynsham because he feared for their safety.

The cusp arrives on the third day, when Captains Mackworth and Beckwith, fearing that the shippage moored near to the Arnolfini end of the square will go up in flames – and the whole city with it - command their men to charge: 'charge men, and charge home!'. They charge through the square at full gallop, cutting rioters to pieces; sabre-ing, riding over bodies, driving people into burning buildings, they charged through Queen Square, back again, down Prince Street and back to Queen Square.

In a few minutes, 130 people are killed or wounded. It's the beginning of the end. A small army is underway and soon reaches Bristol: the Tetbury, North Wiltshire, Somerset, Frome and Wincanton yeomanry, the 11<sup>th</sup> Foot, the 52<sup>nd</sup> from Portsmouth, other troops from Dublin, Waterford, Cork, Pembroke and Plymouth as well as 4000 special constables. A brigade of artillery arrives and frigates moved into the Bristol Channel. It's over.

Yes, there's a trial. Mayor Charles Pinney is taken to court and accused of failing in his duty to protect citizenry and property. Colonel Brereton is court-martialled on 11 charges of conduct "altogether unprecedented and unheard of in a British officer"; the 4<sup>th</sup> day of the trial is especially damning. After it he shoots himself, leaving two orphaned little daughters (his wife was dead).

29 Queen Square houses were destroyed. 2 cartloads of broken glass were removed. 40 wagonloads of looted property were collected. The Corporation proposed that the rioters be tried before Sir Charles Wetherell, but the Government overruled this.

A Special Commission opened at the Guildhall and there were 12 days of trials of 100 rioters. 43 get prison with hard labour; 6 get 7 years transportation (to Australia, New Zealand ...); 1 gets 14 years. 27 get death sentences, which are commuted to life transportation. 4 are condemned to death and hanged above New Gaol on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January 1832 in front of a large crowd (the gateway where they were hanged is still there, next to the Land Rover dealers on Spike Island).

A Captain Warrington is court martialled for refusing to obey the mayor's orders. Colonel Brereton, as we saw, is court-martialled and shoots himself. Mayor Pinney is acquitted.

On January the 4<sup>th</sup>, 1832 King William IV asks Wellington to withdraw his opposition to the Reform Bill. Wellington and 100 supporters retire from the House and the remaining peers pass the Bill. It is 1837 before Lord John Russell, (who had introduced the 1832 Reform Bill) declares it a final settlement. The declaration earned him the nickname 'Finality Jack'. It is 50 more years before the Corporation itself is reformed.

[Health warning: this is a personal interpretation of the 1831 Bristol Riots culled from many sources. Feel free to disagree!]

Ralph Hoyte 2004