

# THE SPA FIELDS RIOTS OF 1816

## David Sutton

### Personal Introduction

It is a little over 30 years since I began studying the radical groups in London in the period immediately after the end of the Napoleonic Wars. I was spurred rather than deterred by a strange incident early in 1980 as I began to pursue a biographical interest in the charismatic figure of Arthur Thistlewood. As we shall see, Thistlewood was to play a major role in the Spa Fields events of 1816 and, less than four eventful years later, was to be hanged as the leader of the “Cato Street Conspirators”, who had been planning to assassinate the whole of Lord Liverpool’s Cabinet. One intriguing aspect was Thistlewood’s military career, and in particular his having fought on both sides in the wars of the 1790s. It was reported that early in the decade he was part of a British detachment to the West Indies (where members of his family had been plantation-owners). It seems, however, that he soon, legally, left the Army and moved to the United States. From there he is said to have made his way to Paris, arriving in the terrible year of 1794 and enlisting in the French revolutionary army. After spending some time fighting for the French, he returned to England and joined the First Regiment of the West Riding Militia, under the command of Earl Fitzwilliam, on 1 July 1798. (Reports that he fought with the French grenadiers at the Battle of Zürich in 1799 must surely be false.) He later returned to his home county of Lincolnshire and may have joined the Third Lincoln Militia. He was clearly an experienced, and probably a battle-hardened, soldier, said to have acquired revolutionary ideals from his reading of Thomas Paine (whom he may have met in Paris), and from his periods of residence in the United States and France. Nonetheless he was careful to retain his status as a gentleman, and his first marriage in Lincoln in 1804 was duly reported in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*.

In Spring of 1980, as a fairly respectable postdoctoral researcher at the Université de Paris-VIII, I requested to have access to records held by the Whitehall Library in the Old War Office Building of the Ministry of Defence, in order to check the details of Thistlewood’s military careers between 1791 and 1805.

My request was refused, on grounds of national security.

### The Spa Fields and the Spenceans

On 15 November and 2 December 1816 took place two of the largest public meetings and demonstrations which had been seen in London for decades. The meetings were both held in Spa Fields, near Clerkenwell. As these names - “fields of spas” and “clerks’ well” - indicate, this part of outer London was known for its drinkable water. A trip to Spa Fields to take the waters had been an elegant excursion in the eighteenth century, perhaps especially for those who could not afford to travel to Bath or Cheltenham.

The huge attendance at the first Spa Fields meeting caught its organisers by surprise, and the meeting was “adjourned” to 2 December. The events of 2 December 1816 are usually described in history books as the Spa Fields Riots, and

they opened a period of active and often desperate revolutionary plotting in London which culminated in the “Cato Street Conspiracy” of 1820. The organisers of the riots and of most of the radical agitation which took place in London in the following three years were members of a group known as “the Spenceans”, whose leading figures were Arthur Thistlewood, James Watson senior, James Watson junior, Thomas Evans senior, Thomas Evans junior, Thomas Preston, James Wedderburn and William Davidson.

The lives and the political activities of these Spenceans have yet to be fully explored. Thistlewood’s personal biography is potentially remarkable, and it may be that the Ministry of Defence would now permit some further research. If sources could be found, it would also be fascinating to conduct a separate research project on the life-stories of Wedderburn and Davidson, two influential black London revolutionaries originally from Jamaica.

## The Background to 1816

Amongst extreme anti-government and Jacobin-influenced groups, the “radical party” in London was always expected, and expected itself, to be taking a leading role. There is abundant evidence that the low profile and comparative tranquillity of political London through late 1815 and much of 1816 was not just a disappointment but an embarrassment to the London activists, and especially to those who classed themselves as revolutionaries.

By contrast, throughout the 1790s the London Corresponding Society had been the recognised (and courageous) leading force within British radicalism year after year, whilst the smaller group following and advocating the agrarian communist principles of Thomas Spence had also been primarily based in London.

From the perspective of the government led by William Pitt the Younger, London had persistently seemed to be the centre of dangerous, often pro-French, radical revolt. This view was based on frightening events including the “Crimp riots” of 1794; the 1795 demonstrations organised by the London Corresponding Society; the United Englishmen plot of 1798 (inspired by the revolt led that year by the United Irishmen); the Despard revolt of 1802; and the disturbances at the Middlesex elections of 1802, 1804 and 1806, and at the Westminster elections of 1806 and 1807.<sup>1</sup>

The United Englishmen and Despard plots in particular appeared to justify government fears that, working within the always turbulent London mob, there was a small Jacobin revolutionary cadre seeking to promote a violent revolution:

By 1797 it is clear that some of the extreme Jacobins had come to despair of constitutional agitation. From this time forward, for more than twenty years, there was a small group of London democrats (Spencean or republican) who saw no hope but in a *coup d'état*, perhaps aided by French arms, in which some violent action would encourage the London ‘mob’ to rise in their support. It was this tradition which was inherited by Arthur Thistlewood and by another Dr Watson in 1816.<sup>2</sup>

Around 1798 the Spenceans moved on from the selling of idealistic tracts and their fascination with graffiti<sup>3</sup> to a commitment to insurrectionary violence, with Irish

and French inspiration - as is indicated by this passage from a well-researched but overtly hostile source:

Agents of Irish revolutionary societies, notably of the United Irishmen, were intriguing with France and were making catspaws of ignorant republican enthusiasts in England. Thomas Evans, one of these enthusiasts, wanted to establish a republic by means of a revolution. He was promoting a real “revolutionary” society, the United Englishmen, and he was involved in the toils of O’Quigley and his agents, who were engaged in carrying communications between Ireland and France via England.<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Evans, who was later to be the founder of the Society of Spencean Philanthropists, was imprisoned from 1798 to 1801 for his treasonable activities.

One of the principal reasons why there was little dangerous or revolutionary activity in London in the first part of 1816 was divided leadership. Amongst the extreme radicals there continued to be a division between former activists in the London Corresponding Society and the Spenceans, who were regarded by the L.C.S. group as wild and unstable. (Thomas Evans had been a leading member of the L.C.S. in 1798, but a number of uninvolved L.C.S. members had been arrested and imprisoned for attending one of his meetings, and the final government ban on the L.C.S. in 1799 was widely attributed to Evans’s recklessness.) At the same time there was a growing force of more respectable middle-class radicals, led by Sir Francis Burdett and Francis Place, who were agitating for relief of the poor and the post-war unemployed rather than the overthrow of the Tory government. The best-known radical public speaker of the time, Henry “Orator” Hunt, hovered between the various camps, and was too great an egoist to form a close alliance with any, but his positions were closest to those of Burdett and Place. He always showed greater personal courage than radical theorists like Place or Cobbett, however, and was imprisoned on several occasions. Other constitutional radicals in 1816 included aldermen and councilmen of the City of London, and they were joined on occasion by a few Whig Parliamentarians and even junior members of the royal family.

Post-war unemployment, poverty and food shortages led to public anger and unrest throughout the country. There were many formal public meetings in London in 1816, correctly and constitutionally organised, which raised petitions and passed resolutions. A Westminster meeting on 23 February was addressed by Wishart, Major Cartwright, Hunt, Burdett and Lord Cochrane, and passed many resolutions, of which the one most noticed by the press was an attack on income tax. At the start of August there was a General Meeting of the Association for the Relief of the Manufacturing and Labouring Poor at the City of London Tavern, with the Archbishop of Canterbury and William Wilberforce in attendance; the chair was taken by the Duke of York and the chief speaker was the Duke of Kent; several resolutions were passed and several benevolent subscriptions proposed. At a public meeting in Southwark on 17 October to discuss the widespread distress of the poor, a speaker called Mr Kemmish attracted attention by commenting on the futility of petitioning.<sup>5</sup>

It is small wonder that the radicals despaired of such meetings and saw them as a sad indictment of radical London. In the autumn of 1816, the spies’ reports in the Home Office papers record again and again, especially amongst the Spencean group, an increasingly desperate desire to do something, to make something big happen.

The established leaders of the revolutionary London group in 1815-16 were the two father-and-son pairings sharing the names of Thomas Evans and James Watson. The rising leader of the group, however, was certainly Arthur Thistlewood. Thistlewood could hardly fail to cut an impressive figure amongst the London radicals, with his knowledge of revolutionary USA and France and his extensive military record.

Moreover, Thistlewood is unlikely to have discouraged the rumours and legends that swirled around his name in London's post-war radical circles and that find their way repeatedly into the secret Home Office files. It is unlikely that anyone will ever be able to verify, for example, the tales of his duelling prowess in the revolutionary Paris of the 1790s; and no sources have been found to confirm the suggestion that he was a veteran of the Despard Conspiracy of 1802. (On the contrary, the likelihood is that around that time he was at home in Lincolnshire; certainly we know that in 1804 Arthur Thistlewood of the city of Lincoln, gentleman, married Jane Worsley of the same city - the very lengthy marriage settlement survives in the Lincolnshire Archives.)

Our sources confirm fairly definitely that in 1814, during the interlude while Napoleon was imprisoned on Elba, Thistlewood had been one of the many English visitors to Paris and that he paid for Thomas Evans junior to accompany him. Whilst in Paris, Thistlewood and young Evans are said to have visited a number of English and Irish Jacobin rebels in exile - further enhancing Thistlewood's revolutionary credentials.

By the end of 1816, Thistlewood was close to being the undisputed leader of the most extreme London radicals. His second wife Susan Thistlewood clearly shared his Jacobin views and was another strong figure in the London group, which was notable for including women as well as black activists.

The group also included a constant presence of government spies. In the Home Office papers, remarkably preserved in the National Archives, there are reports (often pencil scribbles on scraps of paper) from at least twenty spies who had infiltrated the radical groups in the period 1815-1820. The most notorious of the spies came to be Oliver, Castle and Edwards, but the reports of Shegog (Spy "B"), Williamson ("C"), Capper ("B.C.") and Adams are almost as full and important.

## **Planning Spa Fields**

Towards the end of 1816 Thistlewood's group began to plan a different kind of public meeting in London - one which would be huge in scale, but which would also be specifically designed to feature violence and to lead to widespread rioting. This is the account of the planning and build-up written by the spy John Castle, preserving his grammar, spelling and punctuation:

I have known old Watson for nearly 12 months but have been more particularly acquainted with him for about 6 months past, he frequented the Spencean Society and he proposed me for a Member and paid my Admission. I have known young Watson for about 3 months he is a Spencean also. I have seen them at the Cock in Grafton Street, the Nag's Head and the Mulberry Tree.

I was at the Carlisle Public House Shoreditch previous to the Spa Fields Meeting with Preston, Thislewood, both the Watsons, Hooper and many others. Thislewood paid the Reckoning.

Got acquainted the old Watson by going to the Spencean Societies which are open to any one Preston is a Member, the same night I was made Preston called me out and we had a drop of Gin together at the Bar of the Cock, he asked me to meet him and the others at the Mulberry Tree the next Night which I did, and met old Evans, young Evans, Watson, Preston and Thislewood, and in returning Home, we got into Conversation, Watson said how easy it was to upset the Government, if it was only handled as it ought to be, it might be done without any blood being spilt, Watson shewed Plans of Instruments for acting against the Horse, a sort of Carriage on 4 Wheels with Scythes projecting from it on each Side and in the Front so that three or four men might drive it before them and clear a Street while those behind might be firing over them. - Watson also described a chemical Preparation composed of Pulverised Silver, Steel Filings and pounded Flint which is so liable to explosion that if a little of it is put into a Letter the mere opening of the Letter would cause it to explode. [...] I continued keeping Company with them until I was made one of the Committee which was about a fortnight or three Weeks before the first Meeting in Spa fields, Thislewood, Old Watson, and young Watson, Harrison and Preston were the Committee and they added me to the Number, and afterwards they added Hooper, upon Harrison withdrawing himself, the Committee met every Morning to settle what to do, and in the Evening to report what had been done, they met at N<sup>o</sup>. 9 Greystoke Place, we generally went two and two, Thislewood and I generally went together, sometimes I went with young Watson, we went mostly among the Soldiers and Sailors, Thislewood gave the poor Sailors Money, and treated the Soldiers, he has treated them when on Guard at the Theatres, at a Public House in Long Lane, where the Soldiers use, and at a House in Vinegar Yard, Drury Lane, they used to sound the Soldiers and ask if any thing happened would they fire on the Mob. and they generally said No, they would not that they wanted a big Loaf as well as other People.

The same report later contains several snippets and insights about the preparations for the Spa Fields meetings, of which the following are typical:

Thislewood was the Head and the others of the Committee reported to him and old Watson, who was the next.

Mrs. Thislewood made the Flag - She gave it to me, and I took it to Spa fields the first meeting - The inscription to the Soldiers was prepared by old Watson.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the spies' reports in the Home Office papers read like this: a mixture of inventions and embellishments with a genuine personal note bringing back to life the key players from nearly 200 years ago, occasionally with wonderfully authentic reported dialogue reminiscent of *The Pickwick papers*.

The sources from which we can try to establish the origins and purposes of the Spa Fields meetings are principally in the Home Office papers, the Treasury Solicitor's papers, and contemporary newspapers. Within the Home Office papers the two main sources are the spies' reports, which clearly have to be treated with caution, and the retrospective accounts by radicals, written from the safety of 1818 or

1819, once the legal proceedings against the organisers had collapsed. Amongst contemporary newspapers, we distinguish between the largely hostile mainstream press (the accounts in *The Times* were especially full) and the sympathetic radical press (which was capable of printing headlines such as “Killing No Murder”, in defence of tyrannicide<sup>7</sup>). Other primary sources are W. B. Gurney: *The trial of James Watson for High Treason* (1817) and *Report of the Secret Committee of the House of Lords respecting certain dangerous meetings and combinations* (presented to the House by the Earl of Harrowby, 18 February 1817).

A sifting and combining of these sources gives us a fairly certain story of the planning of the Spa Fields meetings and of what then actually happened. The story is of a plan for a huge mass meeting, of far the most radical demeanour seen in 1816, but also, for a small core group, the plan within the plan was for a revolutionary insurrection whose key features were to be raids on a number of gunsmiths’ shops, the arming of the most militant members of the mob, an attack on at least one prison (or “bastille”), and the seizure of the Tower of London and the Bank of England. Most commentators have seen a measure of fantasy in these schemes, but pikes and guns were purchased ahead of the second Spa Fields meeting, and the attacks on the gunsmiths’ shops did take place.

To get a sense of the dynamic of the radicals in London in the run-up to Spa Fields, the model suggested by T. M. Parssinen is useful.<sup>8</sup> This proposes three concentric circles of engagement, with the small group of hard-core revolutionary plotters at the centre. Around them would be a larger group of revolutionary sympathisers, prepared to take action. Parssinen numbers this second group between 100 and 500. The outer circle would be the interested and supportive individuals who were prepared to attend public meetings. Parssinen numbers the outer circle between 5000 and 10000, although it appears that there were more than this at the second Spa Fields meeting (the ever-fearful Francis Place estimated 300,000!).

Parssinen’s model serves us well when we consider and interpret the spies’ reports on the activities of the radical groups. We constantly see examples of the inner circle trying to galvanise the outer circles into revolutionary action. Consider this account, by Spy B (Shegog):

Thistlewood, Preston and Party are constant and indefatigable in their pursuit after Converts, and they have strong hopes in being able to muster Two Thousand Men by Saturday Week, Men that will act (as Thistlewood says) and not debate and talk; none would believe but those that are concerned of their preparation for attempting to raise the Standard of Rebellion - Thistlewood thinks if they are enabled to form a rallying point, that in a few hours they will be enabled to raise the whole Population of London, and effect a complete Revolution.

This is an account by Sir Nathaniel Conant, based on another report by Shegog:

Preston at the meeting said delay was necessary which enraged Thistlewood excessively. Thistlewood said the fires would bring out the Mob but he specified no places except the Theatre at the bottom of Drury Lane - and he said there were two Linnen draper’s Shops at the foot of Westminster Bridge which would be seen down the River & in the Borough & bring the Mob together & give alarm at the Treasury. Shegog appears satisfied that none of these insane malignitys will be acted on to night.

And here is an authentic-sounding account by “W.A.A.W.”, on the information of one Cooke (not a regular spy), showing the inflammatory efforts of Preston, Thistlewood and the Watsons being rebuffed at a meeting in Shadwell in October 1816:

informed him that about 3 weeks ago he saw a person named Preston a Shoemaker, rather lame (who formerly lived on Mutton Hill, Clerkenwell, but of whose present residence he was ignorant) in company with three persons at the George in Shadwell; that Preston’s appearance was dirty and shabby, but the 3 others decent and respectable, that he knew not the names of the others but from their conversation believed one to be a medical man. Another had lately come from France, the third was a young man who seemed of very clever abilities - their conversation was very wild & seditious lamenting the state of the poor, and stating that they could raise many thousand men in arms to join them & shewing a printed bill respecting a meeting at the Bear in Bear Lane Southwark to petition the Prince to put down machines in Factories, and other printed bills which they would not trust out of their hands, and stating that they should be in the neighbourhood again in about 3 weeks when something would be done. The persons in the room not approving these sentiments the Conversation grew warm ...<sup>9</sup>

Undeterred by such rebuffs, the inner core of London activists developed a plan for an insurrectionary *putsch* under the cover of a mass demonstration.

In addition to the plans to purchase pikes and guns, to identify gunsmiths’ shops for attack and to fraternise with the soldiers, there was a clear echo of Paris in 1793 in the proposed formation of a Committee of Public Safety to administer the capital. The plans and preparations were weak, when compared for example to the *Conjuration des Egaux* led by Gracchus Babeuf in Paris in 1796, but some actions were taken ahead of the second Spa Fields meeting. Pikes and guns were purchased (there is multiple evidence in the Treasury Solicitor’s papers that 250 pikes were bought from a man called Bentley and that James Watson junior and John Hooper arrived at the second Spa Fields meeting with a number of pistols); gunsmiths were identified; Thistlewood and Preston spoke to the soldiers on guard at the Tower and believed that they had received an encouraging response. A paper found on James Watson senior after the riots read as follows:

Committee P. S.

Sir F. Burdett, Lord Cochrane, Mr. A. Thistlewood, Mr. J. Watson, Mr Gale Jones. Major Cartwright, Mr T. J. Evans, H. Hunt Esq<sup>r</sup>, Mr. Hardy, Mr. R. O. O’Connor, Mr Blandford.<sup>10</sup>

It is certain that Burdett, Cochrane and Cartwright, and most of the others, would have been horrified to see themselves nominated to this Robespierrian committee.

The Spencean organisers managed to persuade Henry “Orator” Hunt to be their principal speaker at Spa Fields. Hunt was a radical not a revolutionary, and our sources provide plenty of evidence that he was cautious and nervous about agreeing to attend. As we noted earlier, however, for all his faults of vanity and bombast, Hunt did not lack personal courage and in the end his attendance was confirmed, to the delight of the organisers. Hunt was the best-known radical public speaker of the day, and his presence guaranteed a huge crowd.

## The Spa Fields Riots

One of the seditious printed handbills for the second Spa Fields meeting reads with genuine immediacy and anger, despite its bathetic ending:

### BRITONS TO ARMS

The Whole Country waits the Signall from London to fly to Arms! Haste, break open Gunsmiths, and other likely places to find Arms!! Run all Constables who touch a man of Us. No Rise of Bread, No Regent! No Castlereagh. Off with their heads. No Placement Tythes, or Enclosures. No Bishops, only useless lumber! Stand true or be Slaves for Ever!  
N.B. 5000 of these Bills are up in the Town, & printed ones with further particulars will appear in due time.<sup>11</sup>

Amongst the core group, there were repeated warnings both against looting and against firing on the soldiers. This is a piece of evidence from the Treasury Solicitor's papers:

Preston was to take the Tower, old Watson the Bank, all private Property was to be respected, except Gunsmiths' Shops, and the Arms taken were to be settled for afterwards, the first Man found plundering was to be taken and hung up immediately.<sup>12</sup>

Only a small proportion of the large crowd which began to assemble on 2 December 1816 would have been personally ready to engage in violence, but equally very few of those present could have been expecting the sort of peaceable protest meeting which a duke or an archbishop might chair.

This is the opening of a *Narrative of the Proceedings at the Spa Fields Meeting*, found in the Home Office papers:

On Monday the 2nd of December 1816, a large Crowd say about 2000 assembled opposite the Merlins Cave Public House about half past eleven o'clock a still greater concourse however was dispersed in various parts of the Fields but particularly in the direction of Cold Bath Fields, from which Quarter Mr. Hunt and his Party were expected to enter. About 12 o'clock general attention was attracted by the appearance of two Tri coloured Flags and a Banner bearing the following Inscription 'The Brave Soldiers are our Brothers, treat them kindly'. These were borne by shabby looking Men one dressed in a Velveteen Jacket and small clothes and accompanying them were Mr. Watson Sen<sup>r</sup> and Jun<sup>r</sup>: both of whom had rendered themselves conspicuous at the former Meetings. The moment that flags were seen an immense Multitude flocked around them, and after some hesitation Mess<sup>rs</sup> Watson, and several others mounted a Waggon which was drawn across the Path.<sup>13</sup>

Pre-empting Orator Hunt, the older Watson and then the younger Watson made rousing seditious speeches from their wagon, before Watson junior seized a flag and began to implement the plan within the plan:

At that instant the Orator seized the largest of the tri coloured Flags, & leading the Mob marched off towards Clerkenwell amidst loud shouts.



Confusion ensued. The rioters headed mostly for the Bank of England, although one group (with cries of “To the Bastille”) made their way to Newgate Prison. (Several of the spies’ reports identified the freeing of all the prisoners in Newgate as a prime objective of the organisers.) Most of the crowd, however, remained at Spa Fields to hear Hunt’s lengthy speech, transcripts of which survive. Typically, large parts of it were about Hunt himself and the heroic way in which he had suffered for the cause. According to the original edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, the soldiers had orders to fire at Hunt rather than into the crowd should disorder break out at Spa Fields.

The disorder, however, was taking place elsewhere. The first attack on a gunsmith’s shop was resisted. Shots were fired; the gunsmith was wounded and soldiers began to appear. There was a major incident at the Royal Exchange, where it was reported that armed rioters marched in battle order (suggesting that there were a good number of former soldiers in their ranks). The soldiers and constables managed to close the gates of the Royal Exchange, under fire, and it is reported that the rioters continued to fire their guns under the gates once they had been secured. Two Spenceans, Hooper and Cashman, were seized by the soldiers at the Royal Exchange. Cashman was hanged on 12 March 1817 for theft of firearms; the London jury infuriated and amazed the judge by finding Hooper not guilty.

The rioters left the Royal Exchange and a number of other public buildings were then attacked. The official reports say that all the windows of Somerset House were broken - which is a lot of windows - and there were battles between the soldiers and the rioters at Fleet Market, Snow Hill and the Minories. The armed insurgents were in control of the Minories for some hours. An armed band led by Thistlewood marched in military order down the Minories to the Tower of London, where Thistlewood climbed the wall and addressed the soldiers - inviting them to surrender the Tower. This they refused to do, but neither did they open fire.

The military organisation and skills of the insurgents were of great concern and surprise to the authorities. This indignant report is from *The Times* of 3 December 1816:

Wild and desperate as such a scheme must have been, yet a scheme the rioters certainly had: they marched under their own banners; they armed themselves, and paraded through the streets, ostentatiously displaying such skill as they had in the use of their arms. Their forces were divided into separate bands, setting the Chief Magistrate of the city, with all his officers, at defiance, and attempting their lives. Finally, they committed robbery, and, we fear, what may prove to be murder. That this scheme was premeditated, the single circumstance of the flags would strongly indicate: and when to this is added the fact of the ringleaders having directly proceeded to the gunsmiths’ shops, little doubt can rest on any mind that the whole proceeding was arranged long beforehand. Every part of these occurrences forcibly calls to our mind the events of 1780.

After the disappointing response of the guards at the Tower, the insurgents began to lose impetus. A group of soldiers retook control of the Minories before nightfall, and the rioters dispersed, having captured no buildings and having no follow-up plan. The crowd in Spa Fields had gone away peaceably some time earlier. The day which had seen the greatest public disturbance in London since the Gordon Riots ended in confusion and flight. Whilst all sorts of rumours circulated (notably

that the royal family had fled London), the supporters in cities like Manchester, Sheffield and Dublin who waited anxiously for news of the insurrection and possibly the seizure of part of the capital were to be deeply disappointed when the mail-coaches arrived.

## Aftermath

The following day the soldiers and the constables began to reinforce their victory. The Spencean organisers were pursued and many of them arrested. Although a third Spa Fields meeting took place on 10 December, with another huge crowd and an even longer speech by Orator Hunt, the Spenceans and their followers were absent and the meeting ended quietly.

James Watson senior was arrested in Highgate on the evening of 2 December. Thistlewood and young Watson, who were with him, managed to escape, and young Watson succeeded in finding a boat to the United States, where he settled in Pittsburgh. Thistlewood was captured in May 1817 when, with a group of comrades, he tried to board a boat at Gravesend to sail to the USA.

On 9 June 1817 Watson, Thistlewood, Hooper and Preston were arraigned for High Treason (this was the second attempt in three months to have Hooper hanged). Another London jury, however, showed its radical sympathies; the evidence of the spy John Castle was discredited; and Watson was found not guilty. No further evidence was offered against the others, and they were also found not guilty. The Home Secretary and his colleagues were in despair at these decisions.

With remarkable courage, the Spenceans returned almost at once to their agitation. They also retained both their working relationship with Hunt and the relationship of mutual loathing with the Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth. In 1818 Thistlewood was jailed for challenging Sidmouth to a duel. Over the next three years, the great demonstration and riot of Spa Fields were invoked again and again in radical meetings. These four brief passages from the *Gentleman's Magazine* summarise the story:

In St Thomas's Hospital, [death of] John Hooper, one of the State prisoners, tried with Thistlewood, Preston and Watson, for High Treason. His remains were interred by the side of Cashman according to his request, attended by Watson, Thistlewood, Preston, and others of his political associates, and an immense assemblage of spectators. He had been in a declining state of health ever since his acquittal. [December 1817]

Imprisonment was not merely a vile experience at this period; it could prove fatal. The next passage concerns a meeting at Spa Fields in 1818:

They listened for a considerable time to an harangue from Watson, who, of course, desired them to conduct themselves peaceably, and they did so. The second orator was Preston, who spoke not only of the abuses of Government, but of some which came nearer his own bosom, the ill distribution of the subscriptions raised for those who had been imprisoned under the Suspension Act! Thistlewood, without who, he said, there would never have been a meeting in Spa-fields, was now neglected in his misfortunes! [May 1818]

The final two passages come from 1819, and show a considerable continuity from the activities of 1816 which we looked at in more detail:

A meeting of Radical Reformers was held at four this afternoon in Smithfield, Dr. Watson in the chair, who, with Thistlewood, Preston, and others, addressed the multitude. Many violent resolutions were carried. Owing to vigilance and forbearance of the civil power, under the direction of the Lord Mayor, the afternoon passed off without any disturbance of the public peace. [August 1819]

Orator Hunt this afternoon entered the Metropolis, amidst a procession of flags, &c. got up by Messrs. Watson, Thistlewood, Preston, and others of his friends, among whom there had been some squabbling on the subject. [September 1819]

Although the Spenceans were still operating in the reflected glory of the Spa Fields riots almost three years later, around this time Thistlewood and a small number of his comrades lost patience with public meetings of any kind, and turned towards the idea of exemplary violence and assassination (a version of what Gramsci was to call “prefigurative struggle”). This led them into the desperate trap of the Cato Street Conspiracy early in 1820, and to their death by hanging.

The minute attention paid by the Home Office to the potential jurors for the Cato Street trial – with dozens of annotated jurors’ lists in the Treasury Solicitor’s papers, and hundreds of comments on potential jurors – show the absolute determination of the government in 1820 to secure its Guilty verdicts. No doubt the Home Office believed that the prodigious scale of the jury-vetting was proportionate to the threat posed by this group of radical leaders. And certainly it is the case that after the hanging of Thistlewood and his close associates, despite their rousing and defiant words on the scaffold, radical London was quiet for over a decade.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cf John Stevenson: *Popular disturbances in England, 1700-1870*. London: Longman, 1979, pp. 163-189.

<sup>2</sup> E. P. Thompson: *The making of the English working class*. New ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, p. 190.

<sup>3</sup> According to one source, they chalked the words Spence's Plan "on every wall in London". G. Wallas: *The life of Francis Place, 1771-1854*. London: Longmans, 1898, p. 62, citing British Library Add.MS.27808.

<sup>4</sup> O. D. Rudkin: *Thomas Spence and his connections*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1927, p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> Press reports; e.g. *Anti-Gallican Monitor*, 25 February 1816, p. 4527; 4 August 1816, p. 4717; 20 October 1816, p. 4811.

<sup>6</sup> The National Archives, H.O.44.4.362-363 (endorsed "Most Secret"). Snippets from H.O.44.4./364 (verso).

<sup>7</sup> *Sherwin's Weekly Political Register*, 14 November 1818.

<sup>8</sup> T. M. Parssinen: 'The revolutionary party in London, 1816-1820'. *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 45 (1972), p. 273.

<sup>9</sup> These three quotations at H.O.40.8.1, fol.35 recto; in H.O.42.170; and in H.O.42.155, 12 November 1816.

<sup>10</sup> "Copies of Papers found upon the Person of Old Watson", in the National Archives, T.S.11.199; another copy in T.S.11.202.

<sup>11</sup> H.O.40.7/10 no.16 (fol. 33).

<sup>12</sup> T.S.11.203, fol.785.

<sup>13</sup> H.O.40.7/10 no.14 (fols. 27ff.).