

“Commons-Stealers”, “Land-Grabbers” and “Jerry-Builders”: Space, Popular Radicalism and the Politics of Public Access in London, 1848–1880

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Summary: This article places the campaign for rights of public access in London in context. It provides a structural analysis of the importance of public space in metropolitan radicalism, and in so doing explores prevailing assumptions about the different uses of such space in a provincial and metropolitan setting. Its chief focus is upon opposition to restrictions on rights of public meeting in Hyde Park in 1855 and 1866–1867, but it also charts later radical opposition to the enclosures of common-land on the boundaries of London and at Epping Forest in Essex. In particular it engages with recent debates on the demise of Chartism and the political composition of liberalism in an attempt to explain the persistence of an independent tradition of mass participatory political radicalism in the capital. It also seeks explanations for the weakness of conventional liberalism in London in the issues raised by the open spaces movement itself.

Recent research in nineteenth-century radical politics has emphasized the continuities apparent between liberalism, Chartism and earlier agitations of mass political protest. The mid-century period 1850–1880 is no longer seen merely as a transitional phase between an age of mass radicalism and a later period of tranquillity, but instead has been reinterpreted as an important bridge linking the cultures of liberalism and working-class political activism. The perception of politics that emerges from the work of Eugenio Biagini or Patrick Joyce¹ is of an almost entirely unified political culture sharing basic common assumptions, personnel and methods of mobilization.¹ Against this background it is becoming increasingly difficult to detect the fault-lines that distinguish liberalism from earlier political forms. Yet, whilst acknowledging the

¹ There is now a large literature on this subject, but see in particular E.F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone 1860–1880* (Cambridge, 1992), chs 1–5; P. Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth Century England* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 85–136; M. Hewitt, “Radicalism and the Victorian Working-Class: The Case of Samuel Bamford”, *Historical Journal*, 34 (1991), pp. 873–892 and for the most recent contribution to the debate M.C. Finn, *After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics 1848–1874* (Cambridge, 1993), introduction and chs 2, 3 and 4.

outward similarities in style and language that link the two movements, it is clear that distinctions can, and indeed should, be made, especially in areas of only superficial overlap. It is also clear that in some instances these differences amount to far more than simply nuances of meaning in platform rhetoric, but embrace fundamental issues of each movement's relationship to the state and the centralized power structures of the nation.

The open spaces agitation in London in the middle years of the century constitutes one such major area of disagreement. The concerns of the plebeian organizations involved in this campaign highlight the degree to which liberalism was never entirely synonymous with many older aspects of radical agitation. Indeed this aspect of radicalism denotes a strong divergence in attitudes between the two political forms over a key theme in the popular politics of the period.

In 1892 Henry Jephson mapped out the civic culture of the Victorian townscape.² Writing from a turn of the century perspective and building upon the liberal belief in progress, he was in no doubt that liberalism was the architect of a new civic sphere. This culture he saw as embracing and inclusive, facilitating through municipal fêtes and political visits, the participation of even those normally excluded from the formalized structures of the electoral process. For him space in an urban setting was, above all, allowable of participation by the community as a whole. His attitude was typical of many late nineteenth-century liberals. They saw the public assembly as the “acme of democracy”,³ extending popular participation in political parties, and occupying a key role in securing the 1832 and 1867 reform acts. More recently historians have questioned these assumptions. James Vernon, following the work of Jürgen Habermas, points to the closing down of many popular political forms by the end of the century and the increasing marginalization of women and the poor on the public platform.⁴ Vernon's research has stimulated a lively debate around this theme, but this growing body of work has failed to consider the regional traditions and anomalies that governed the experience of public protest in different localities and omits any reference at all to the metropolitan/provincial divide in politics.⁵ This follows in the tradition of Jephson who was inspired by the liberation

² H. Jephson, *The Platform: Its Rise and Progress*, vol. 2 (London, 1892; reprinted 1968), pp. 467–468 and 608–609.

³ The phrase is Jephson's, see *ibid.*, p. 607.

⁴ J. Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 48–79. For the work of Habermas on associational life in the public sphere, see J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962; English trans., London, 1989), pp. 181–250.

⁵ See for a survey of the literature on space and English radicalism, J. Lawrence, “The Decline of English Popular Politics?”, *Parliamentary History*, 13 (1994), pp. 333–337.

of political forms in the regions, but had rather less to say about the situation in the capital.

What is certain is that access to this civic space was always conditional. Moreover, that space posed different problems of policing and control in the capital than in the big regional centres. In London space was at a premium and provided a contested terrain. Many metropolitan radicals therefore found themselves deliberately locked out of the civic culture of the Victorian city, and denied access to the open spaces that had sustained the mass platform of the 1830s and 1840s in the regions.⁶ This article examines this theme within metropolitan radicalism and in so doing tests the assumptions made about space at a national level.

The significance of space and the importance of access to it in plebeian radical thought has been extensively researched,⁷ but there has been far less exploration of the position of such doctrines within liberalism. In the countryside the liberal concern for space and land was very largely framed in terms of legitimizing and regulating access through due process of law. This was particularly the case where legislation was used to divide land up or to create smallholdings. Here there was a strong radical potential that expressed itself vigorously in the 1880s.⁸ Amongst urban liberals, in contrast, the main impulse was towards the provision of healthy surroundings for recreation. Much of the impetus towards the provision of public parks therefore stemmed from the public health movement, and was linked to the work of other middle-class pressure-groups that aimed at the creation of a healthy sphere for the urban poor.⁹ This was a movement with a high moral tone that was heavily dependent upon the patronage of wealthy individuals. Above all, whilst providing access to new green space, it at the same time sought to regulate and police that space. The urban parks of the 1840s and 1850s were accordingly regulated spheres, scrupulously maintained, and patrolled and policed by the hated park-keepers, who became a part of working-class demonology in their own right, co-operated with the police,

⁶ The constraints on the space available for protest and public interaction in London in the later nineteenth century, particularly with reference to issues of gender, is explored in J.R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian Britain* (London, 1992), especially pp. 15–52.

⁷ There is a full synthesis of the literature on this subject in M. Chase, *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism 1775–1840* (London, 1988), chs 3–4.

⁸ For an overview of the Liberal concern for rural smallholdings in the 1880s see J. Collings and J.L. Green, *The Life of the Rt. Hon. Jesse Collings* (London, 1920), pp. 170–205.

⁹ The fullest and most recent account of the public parks movement is H. Conway, *People's Parks: The Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain* (Cambridge, 1991), especially pp. 56–75. Also see for details of the movement in Manchester D. Baldwin, "The Establishment of Public Parks in Manchester" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Manchester University, 1981), pp. 43–49.

dressed like them, and used fences, gates and padlocks to exclude. The labour leader George Lansbury recalled:

The park-keepers wore top hats, frock-coats, red waistcoats and carried sticks, impressing us all with the official manner in which they carried themselves.¹⁰

Far from creating a space in which the classes might mingle, the parks rather reinforced existing social divisions in London. The landscape of the parks was a controlled environment of winding paths and close-cropped flower borders that fulfilled bourgeois fantasies of a tamed natural landscape, standing midway between a garden and the grounds of a stately home. All London's parks conformed to this image. Octavia Hill, founder of the National Trust established to safeguard the nation's heritage, wrote of them:

All these parks are alike in their main features; they are laid out in walks and avenues planted in trees; they contain broad tracts of green turf; there is an enclosure for cricket; sometimes there is a gymnasium and there is an ornamental water, generally very pretty, with rustic bridges, swans and boats let out for hire.¹¹

Activities such as gambling, courting, prostitution and public meetings were ruthlessly purged from this imagined utopia.¹² Parks, therefore, failed to satisfy the plebeian hunger for space in the capital. Amongst radicals and the reform community, the issue of public access to the open spaces resolved itself into a broader campaign on behalf of long-established rights of assembly and demonstration. It thus acted as the catalyst for a number of other radical themes.

The issue of rights of assembly in public places had a long provenance within the English radical tradition. In the middle years of the nineteenth century there were confrontations over access to public land in most of Britain's towns and cities. In Newcastle a long-standing dispute over restrictions on meetings at Newcastle Town Moor came to a head in the 1870s, and there were similar civic protests over the enclosure of Mousehole Heath outside Norwich, and of Southsea Common near Portsmouth.¹³

¹⁰ G. Lansbury, *My Life* (London, 1928), p. 29.

¹¹ O. Hill, "Space for the People", in her *Homes of the London Poor* (London, 1883; reprinted London, 1970), pp. 89–95. Also see on the theme of the landscape of parks, W.J. Keith, *The Rural Tradition* (Brighton, 1975), pp. 238–240 and J. Taylor, *A Dream of England: Landscape Photography and the Tourist's Imagination* (Manchester, 1994).

¹² The best work on this issue relates to Manchester's parks. See T. Wyborn, "Parks for the People: The Development of Public Parks in Manchester c. 1830–1860", *University of Manchester Working Papers in Economic and Social History*, 29 (1994), pp. 12–20 and A. Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester 1900–1939* (London, 1992), pp. 138–142.

¹³ For the campaign against the enclosure of Newcastle Town Moor see the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 25 March 1871, p. 4 and A. Metcalfe, "Sport and Space: A Case-Study of the Growth of Recreational Facilities in North-East Northumberland 1850–1914", *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 7 (1990), pp. 348–364; for the opposition to the landscaping of Mousehole Heath see N. McMaster, "The Battle for Mousehole Heath

The fiercest conflicts over this issue occurred, however, in the capital. Here the issue of rights of assembly generated intense emotions that provided a thread of continuity linking the radical culture of the 1840s with that of the reform campaign of the 1860s. In many ways the issues raised by access to the public sphere lay at the very heart of the metropolitan radical experience, and the continued reappearance of this aspect of reform politics as a matter of radical concern helps account for the remarkable longevity of an independent radical milieu existing outside liberalism into the 1860s and beyond.

The factor that set the metropolitan open spaces issue apart from similar agitations in the English regions was the presence of the apparatus of central government in Whitehall, and the absence of any single unified tier of local government authority to counteract disturbances there before the 1880s. This contrasted strongly with the provincial situation where Chartism and its successor movements were policed by the municipal authorities, and local magistrates took the chief responsibility for the containment of outbreaks of disorder. In most cases local authorities were in a position to ameliorate or modify Home Office dictates as they saw fit. In Manchester, for example, memories of Peterloo in 1819 (when mounted yeomanry were released into a crowd of reformers causing eleven fatalities) restrained their actions and tempered the worst excesses of Victorian policing apparent in London in 1842 and 1848. Areas such as Stevenson Square in Manchester, the Vicar's Croft in Leeds, or the Bull Ring in Birmingham thus became acknowledged "speakers' corners" where all manner of political, social and religious views might be expressed.¹⁴ Conversely, in London the Metropolitan Police and Special Constables were under the centralized direction of the Home Office. Movements such as Chartism in 1848 and the Reform League which campaigned for parliamentary reform in 1866–1867 thus directly confronted the apparatus of central government in the seat of its authority. Against this background London's open spaces took on a special significance. For the authorities London's parks and gathering spaces provided strategic focal points which they were determined to secure from Chartist occupation. This factor gave London's popular radical agitations a markedly different tone from equivalent movements in the regions. In particu-

1857–1884: Popular Politics and the Victorian Public Park", *Past and Present*, 127 (1990), pp. 117–154. There is a full account of the riots that resulted from the enclosure of Southsea Common by J. Field, "When the Riot Act was Read: A Pub Mural of the Battle of Southsea 1874", *History Workshop*, 10 (1980), pp. 152–161.

¹⁴ There is a long accolade to the traditional role of Stevenson Square as a public forum for the free expression of ideas in Manchester in T. Swindells, *Manchester Streets and Manchester Men*, vol. 2 (Manchester, 1907), p. 159. Similar homage is paid to the equivalent function of the Vicar's Croft in Leeds in the obituary of the West Riding radical, A.B. Wakefield in *The Halifax Courier and Guardian*, 30 November 1928, p. 5, whilst the same phenomenon is also noted of the Birmingham Bull Ring in Lansbury, *My Life*, pp. 90–91.

lar radical leaders adopted a strong confrontational and oppositional stance absent elsewhere in the country. In 1848 Chartism's primary concern was therefore to carve out a public sphere of agitation for itself in opposition to the government's attempts to restrict the rights of public meeting. For the government there were equally sound military reasons why such access should be denied at all costs.

Moreover, in London a defence of the rights of assembly in Trafalgar Square, Bishop Bonner's Field, Clerkenwell Green and elsewhere provided the main impetus to Chartism's continued survival after the Kennington Common meeting of 10 April, sustained the movement throughout the 1850s at a time when its energies were flagging in the regions, and gave an early momentum to the mass platform agitation of the Reform League in the 1860s. Such actions firmly identified the cause of Chartism, and radicalism more generally in the capital, with the cause of free and unfettered assembly in public places.

Gareth Stedman Jones has reinterpreted Chartism, and redefined the movement as primarily a response to coercive legislative action on the part of the state. Conversely, he sees the movement flagging once that state apparatus adopted a far less directly intrusive role in the 1850s.¹⁵ The policing of the metropolis was, however, the one area of legislative authority in which there was no such marked retreat over issues of public disorder and access after 1850. The continuing significance of this issue in London meant therefore that metropolitan radicalism remained uniquely locked into the cultural patterns of conflict that had characterized a previous stage of radical political development.

The legislation governing the control of the capital's open spaces was outdated, *ad hoc*, and above all as a consequence of its improvised nature, capable of almost infinite interpretation. The provisions of Sidmouth's 1817 "Gagging Act", which was passed at a time of major radical disturbances, were central to the government's attempts to discipline the metropolis. Under its terms Westminster was singled out for particular attention, and meetings of more than fifty held within the distance of one mile of the gate of the Palace of Westminster whilst parliament was in session were expressly forbidden. By these means effective provision was made for defence of government offices and the escape of officials during periods of disorder.¹⁶ This statute was therefore very nearly always pressed into service when radical meetings were contemplated in Trafalgar Square. The legal position of public demonstrations in Hyde Park was more ambiguous; in 1866–1867 the government's grounds for

¹⁵ See G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983), especially the introduction and ch 3. There is further discussion of this theme in J. Saville, *1848: The British State and the Chartist Movement* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 22–29.

¹⁶ The statutes governing rights of assembly in Trafalgar Square are summarized in R. Mace, *Trafalgar Square: Emblem of Empire* (London, 1976), pp. 134–154.

opposition to meetings within its boundaries lacked any reliable legal precedent. Under these circumstances the Home Office contested the right to demonstrate in the park on the basis of a discretionary royal veto exercised over the property by the Crown, which still technically owned this and other major London parks. Under its terms the Crown was empowered to restrict any activity that might impede their use for recreational purposes. In addition the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Richard Mayne, opposed the meeting on the grounds of the threat to public order it posed. In 1872 a Royal Parks Bill attempted to clarify the legal position of the parks by imposing a complete ban on all political meetings, but the bill was difficult to enforce and the exact legal position of Hyde Park remained ill-defined.

The apparatus of governmental authority had thus already encroached upon London's public spaces even before 1848. In the late 1840s and 1850s, however, their efforts coincided with attempts by the vestries to curb the recreations traditionally associated with the capital's open spaces on the grounds that they encouraged crime. Fairs suffered the most from these interventions; Bartholomew, Camberwell, Stepney and Wapping fairs had all been abolished by the mid-1850s.¹⁷ In May 1852 a further Home Office decree closed the long-standing radical gathering place at Bishop Bonner's Field to public assemblies.

For Chartists, radicals and surviving reform groups, such interventions posed a clear threat to traditional and long-standing rights of public assembly open to all Englishmen as part of their inherited liberties. Many of the meeting places were themselves connected with these rights and brought together the community of interests that used them in their defence. Bishop Bonner's Field is a case in point. Named after the fanatically anti-Protestant Bishop Bonner, it was the place at which Protestant martyrs were burned during the reign of Catholic Queen Mary in the sixteenth century. As such it was a traditional meeting ground for freethought lecturers to discuss issues of religious intolerance. The radical and atheist Charles Bradlaugh recalled that he first encountered secularist opinions there at disputes in the late 1840s.¹⁸ At a meeting in protest against the prohibition of demonstrations on Bonner's Field, Ralph Curzon, a metropolitan reformer, emphasized the centrality of these historical themes for London radicalism by invoking memories

¹⁷ See for the authorities' attempts to close down the capital's fairs in the 1850s, H. Cunningham, "The Metropolitan Fairs: A Case Study in the Social Control of Leisure", in A. Donajgradzki (ed.), *Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London, 1977), pp. 163–184. There were riots in 1868 over attempts to suppress Croydon Fair on the outskirts of London, see J.N. Morris, "A Disappearing Crowd? Collective Coercive Action in Late Nineteenth Century Croydon", *Southern History*, 11 (1990), pp. 90–113.

¹⁸ See the sketch of Bradlaugh in J. Morrison Davidson, *Lives of Eminent Radicals In and Out of Parliament* (London, 1880), pp. 210–222. George Lansbury also recalled visiting the site to hear the disputes as a boy; see Lansbury, *My Life*, p. 29.

of Magna Carta, when royal power was restrained by a revolt of the barons in 1215, and the accompanying mythology of the constitutional rights of the “freeborn Englishman”:

The Tory government were afraid of freedom of speech and discussion, lest it should lead to freedom of action. All great reforms in England from the Charter gained on the field of Runnymede down to the present, had either commenced, or been consummated by meetings held in the open air.¹⁹

Similar sentiments suffused the rhetoric of the reform agitation of 1866-1867. At a meeting in Trafalgar Square in June 1866 Osborne of the Reform League commented with reference to the government’s attempts to deny access to the square:

That meeting would show the tyrants who wanted to govern them that they were still alive to their rights and liberties. Though there was a fusty old act of parliament prohibiting them from meeting within a mile from the Houses of Parliament, yet the committee had the pluck to call that meeting on that very spot. That was the way to show the power and pluck of Englishmen.²⁰

His remarks summoned up the vision of a creaking, antiquated bureaucracy that was now in collision with the pure and forcefully expressed will of the people. For many radicals such references to an inherited system of Anglo-Saxon freedoms were a far better way of combating the restrictions placed on public meetings in Hyde Park than the tactic favoured by the League’s leader, Edmond Beales, who used his training as a barrister to dissect the minutiae of the government’s proposed legislation. Joshua Toulmin Smith, a long-standing radical and reformer, was highly critical of Beales’ failure to draw more widely upon such themes in his public statements. He wrote to the former Chartist G.J. Holyoake:

I never yet heard that Beales was a lawyer – that is in my notion of what a lawyer is. To deal with the question of the parks needs the soundest and most thorough constitutional thought. It is next to certain that argued in the wrong way the government will be against our rights [. . .] but the constitutional law is with us.²¹

In practice, the outrage generated by the government’s restrictions on access crystallized around opposition to the Metropolitan Police, who were the effective agents of such legislative attempts to exclude. There was a long history of opposition to the police in London. In 1848 the government’s use of the police to deny access to traditional meeting grounds led Chartists to pass resolutions condemning their role as an arm of state control. At a meeting at the Literary and Scientific Institution,

¹⁹ *People’s Paper*, 3 July 1852, p. 7.

²⁰ *The Commonwealth*, 30 June 1866, p. 5.

²¹ J. Toulmin Smith – Holyoake, 29 July 1866 (letter 1681), Holyoake Papers, Co-operative Union Library, Manchester.

Tottenham Court Road, the audience unanimously approved a resolution by the veteran municipal reformer, James Savage, that: “Making the police a military body was subversive of liberty and the British Constitution”.²²

Henry Mayhew’s comments about market traders’ hostility to the police in his investigations into London street life also place them well within the orthodoxy of Chartist thinking on this matter.²³ Moreover, other apparently unrelated metropolitan disturbances frequently developed into clashes with the police over rights of access. In 1855 the opposition to Sir Robert Grosvenor’s Sunday Trading Bill, which sought to restrict the sale of goods on a Sunday, escalated into a full-scale anti-police riot when constables attempted to bar protesters from Hyde Park. By the time of a second demonstration a few days later the affair was less about Sunday trading, than defending time-honoured rights of assembly within the park’s precincts. Karl Marx reported that aristocratic spectators were jostled and anti-police jibes sung.²⁴ Complaints by Charles Bradlaugh about police brutality during these skirmishes first brought him to the attention of a wider public during this period, and made him something of a spokesman on public access issues in London.²⁵ For Ernest Jones, the last Chartist leader of substance, the actions of the police at Hyde Park were merely the visible outward symbol of an increasing and undemocratic tendency towards governmental centralization. In a reference to violence during the cotton strike at Preston in 1854 he commented:

Whether in the prohibition of public meetings as at Preston and elsewhere, and more recently in London, or in the infamous attempts now being made at Sunday legislation, the same tendency is manifest. Centralisation which is a blessing under democratic government, is a curse under a class government.²⁶

The same characteristics were apparent during riots in Hyde Park in 1866 sparked off by government opposition to a reform bill (Figure 1). In a repeat of events in 1855 the police were fiercely attacked. The friendly reception accorded to the army units stationed in the park whom the crowd welcomed with cries of “Hurrah for our brothers in the red coats!”²⁷ also indicates that the police had now replaced soldiers

²² *Northern Star*, 8 July 1848, p. 4.

²³ See H. Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, vol. 1 (London, 1861; reprinted 1967), pp. 20–25.

²⁴ See K. Marx, “Agitation Over the Tightening Up of Sunday Observance”, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol. 14 (London, 1980), pp. 323–327.

²⁵ Sketch of Bradlaugh in *The Commonwealth*, 24 November 1866, p. 4.

²⁶ *People’s Paper*, 7 July 1855, p. 1. His remarks echo the comments of such contemporaries as J. Toulmin Smith who in the 1850s also continued to see the state as an almost entirely coercive body; see W.H. Greenleaf, “Toulmin Smith and the British Political Tradition”, *Public Administration*, 53 (1975), pp. 25–44.

²⁷ See for an account of this episode the long description of the Hyde Park meeting in *The Commonwealth*, 28 July 1866. There is also a reference to this event in Henry

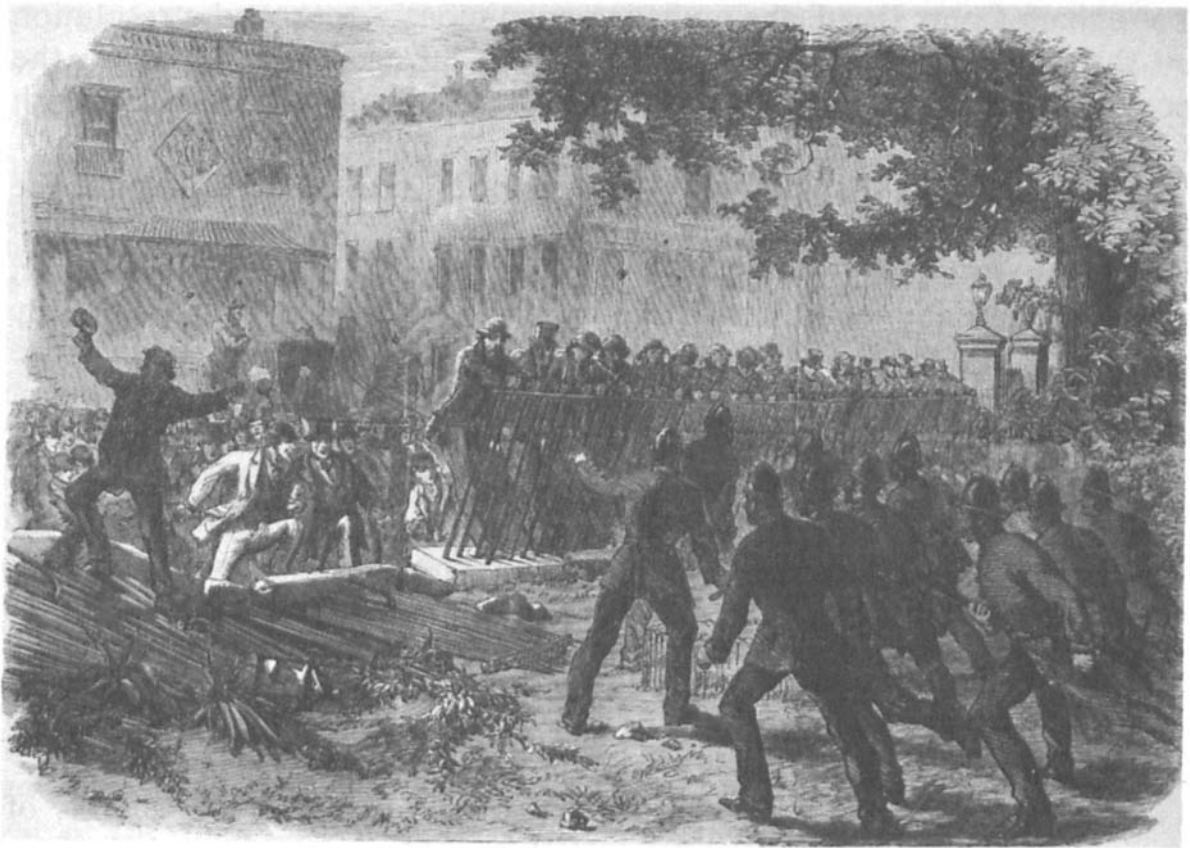


Figure 1. Crowds breaking down the railings round Hyde Park during the riots of July 1866 (*The Illustrated London News*, 4 August 1866, p. 117)

as the perceived enemies of English liberties. Handbills circulating during the demonstration incited attacks against them:

For where Beales is we mean to stay,
 And while he's here we shan't go away,
 If the poleaxes now with us closes,
 They'll be broken heads and bloody noses.²⁸

At the height of the meeting the radical Hows told a crowd at Marble Arch:

Another of their rights had been assailed – the right of meeting in the people's park, and that assemblage within yonder gates, held in the very teeth of Sir Richard Mayne, would be a proof that they had not yet given up that right. That meeting would tell the world that they as "Englishmen" were not to be ruled by their own servants, the police and the soldiery. They were willing enough to be ruled by law, but would never consider a policeman their lawmaker.²⁹

Broadhurst's reminiscences. See H. Broadhurst, *Henry Broadhurst MP: The Story of His Life from a Stonemason's Bench to the Treasury* (London, 1901; reprinted 1984), pp. 34–40.

²⁸ See the British Museum Broadside Collection. Orchestrated attacks on the police in Hyde Park in 1866 are described in D. Richter, *Riotous Victorians* (Athens, Ohio, 1981), pp. 51–61 and P.T. Smith, *Policing Victorian London: Political Policing, Public Order and the London Metropolitan Police* (London, 1985), pp. 161–182.

²⁹ *The Commonwealth*, 28 July 1866.

In later years the cause of access to the capital's public spaces was taken up by the ultra-radical Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in conjunction with the Law and Liberty League, which advocated the formation of citizens' committees to administer the police. Their campaign fused the same issues of rights of access and opposition to the capital's excessive policing measures that had inspired a previous generation of reformers.³⁰ Indeed this campaign was seen as a direct continuation of these earlier episodes, and gained particular inspiration from the events in Hyde Park in 1866.³¹ In 1885 the SDF confronted the authorities over rights of public meeting at Dod Street, Limehouse, resulting in scuffles with the police and the arrest of a number of East End radical leaders.³² Like the metropolitan Reform League such efforts also culminated in a major battle for access to public space, in this instance Trafalgar Square in November 1887.

Both sides in the confrontations over access to Hyde Park or Trafalgar Square saw such episodes as tests of strength. For the reform community in particular the government climb-downs over meetings in Hyde Park in 1855 and 1866–1867 were major victories that swiftly became part of metropolitan folklore. In the 1860s they were seen in particular as an immense personal humiliation for the Home Secretary, Spencer Walpole. In May 1867 a further major meeting in Hyde Park, in clear defiance of a Home Office ban, led to his resignation. Subsequent celebrations of these events therefore focused less on their significance for the progress of the 1867 Reform Act, than on their place in securing rights of public access and freedom of speech in the capital. There is an unmistakably triumphal note in radical responses to them. At the conclusion of the Hyde Park riots of 1855 Ernest Jones commented: "There have been three days of fighting and the people attained the victory".³³ Edmond Beales took a similar line in 1866–1867:

He had no wish to indulge in any vain boasting, but he congratulated them and himself upon the fact that their work was finished as regarded the parks and the right of the people to hold political meetings.³⁴

Subsequently the Reform League struck a decorative medal to commemorate the event,³⁵ thus placing it in the tradition of other highpoints of metropolitan liberties, such as the acquittal of the interned reformers of the London Corresponding Society in 1792 or the verdict of "justifiable

³⁰ The SDF articulated strong opposition to the police even before the Trafalgar Square riots; see *Justice*, 24 May 1884, p. 5. It also campaigned vigorously for rights of access to Primrose Hill in the same year; *ibid.*, 5 July 1884, p. 1.

³¹ This theme is developed in *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 24 November 1887, p. 4.

³² *Justice*, 12 September 1885, p. 2; 10 October 1885, p. 4; and 17 October 1885, p. 2.

³³ *People's Paper*, 3 July 1855, p. 4.

³⁴ *Bee-Hive*, 11 May 1867.

³⁵ See for the design of the Hyde Park medal the *Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Reform League*, 18 August 1866, in the Howell Collection, Bishopsgate Institute.

homicide” returned against the killer of a policeman at Calthorpe Street in 1833, which were similarly commemorated with souvenir memorabilia. Funds on the Chartist model were also established to support protesters arrested in the park,³⁶ whilst the event itself was commemorated with an annual address³⁷ and celebrated in the memoirs and reminiscences of those who took part. In most cases veterans who participated in the meeting, including trade union leaders George Howell and Henry Broadhurst, recalled the fall of the railings as a major landmark in their own careers, and it is commonly referred to in similar vein in the obituaries of more minor figures who were present.³⁸

Moreover, these agitations for rights of access were conducted almost entirely outside the sphere of contemporary liberal politics, with little support from even sympathetic middle-class pressure groups. In this sense they represented a genuine expression of the long-standing, independent, metropolitan radical tradition and demonstrate the uniquely plebeian nature of the concern for public space in London. For many middle-class reformers episodes such as the Hyde Park riots of 1866 awakened long-standing fears of “The Mob” (Figure 2).³⁹ In the 1870s there was a moral panic in London’s polite society about the presence of atheist and freethought agitators in the parks and on the open ground. In a nineteenth-century metropolitan temperance tale, *The Trial of Sir Jasper*, the reformed drunkard begins to show signs of moral improvement only when:

He shuns “The Park” where rogues and rascals scheme,
Where licensed atheists drivel and blaspheme,
Making God’s word a theme for brutal jest,
Busied to desecrate the Day of Rest.⁴⁰

Where middle-class radicals did overcome such fears to become actively

³⁶ See *ibid.*, 19 October 1866 and 4 January, 27 March and 12 July 1867. Also see *The Commonwealth*, 26 January 1867, p. 4, for praise of the metropolitan cabmen’s contribution to the fund on behalf of the interned Hyde Park rioters.

³⁷ For the third annual commemoration of the Hyde Park riots see the *National Reformer*, 25 July 1869, p. 61.

³⁸ See, for example, accounts of the Hyde Park meeting by G. Howell, “People I Have Met: The Fall of the Hyde Park Railings”, *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, 10 June 1906; Broadhurst, *Henry Broadhurst MP*, pp. 34–40 and H. Evans, “Battles of English Liberty: 1866–1867”, *The English Labourers Chronicle*, 27 July 1878, pp. 1–2. Also obituaries of Samuel Bright in the *Club and Institute Journal*, 13 February 1892, p. 25 and of John Snowden in the *National Reformer*, 7 September 1884, p. 174. Former participants in the Trafalgar Square riots of 1887 also felt a similar pride at having been present at a major confrontation with the police and the authorities. See on this point Walter Southgate’s reminiscences of his father in W. Southgate, *That’s the Way it Was: A Working-Class Autobiography 1890–1950* (London, 1982), p. 103.

³⁹ See R. Sindall, *Street Violence in the Nineteenth Century: Real Danger or Media Panic?* (Leicester, 1990), pp. 73–75.

⁴⁰ S.C. Hall, *The Trial of Sir Jasper: A Temperance Tale in Verse* (London, 1872), p. 7.

involved in the open spaces movement, they were rapidly sidelined. Opposition to the restrictions on public meetings at Bonner's Field, for example, came initially from a coalition of middle-class reformers, temperance groups and Chartists. In July 1852 the radical parliamentary candidates for Tower Hamlets, George Thompson and A.S. Ayrton, visited the Home Secretary on the issue.⁴¹ After their early involvement, however, the political initiative on the question passed rapidly to the Chartists. The first issues of Ernest Jones' newspaper, the *People's Paper*, campaigned strongly on the rights of public meeting,⁴² whilst at assemblies in defiance of the ban Chartists gradually achieved prominence on the platform. Leading reformers William Newton and Thornton Hunt addressed a crowded meeting on the green at the beginning of July, and Jones' deputy, James Finlen, spoke on the campaign's behalf at the East London Literary Institution in Morpeth Street.⁴³

This factor indicates the fragility of the cultural leadership offered by the traders and merchants of London on matters of popular politics in the middle years of the century. The great nineteenth-century civic festivals and fêtes were essentially provincial events, and in the capital, where there was in effect no local government, a developed civic culture on the provincial model was far less apparent.⁴⁴ In some instances radical agitators were able to subvert existing ceremonies and convert them into radical demonstrations in their own right. One such example of the hi-jacking of an open-air demonstration occurred at Primrose Hill in 1864 at the time of the Shakespeare celebration organized to commemorate the tercentenary of the playwright's birth (Figure 3). The meeting, which was scheduled to coincide with Shakespeare's birthday in April, was intended as a community event, but included a strong trade union contingent and delegates from reform associations.⁴⁵ For many reformers, Shakespeare's plays had a strong radical subtext. In the 1840s the *Northern Star* ran a column entitled "Chartism in Shakespeare" in which plays such as "Henry IV", "King John" and "Coriolanus" were dissected for radical nuances; the American millionaire Andrew Carnegie, who came from a strongly Chartist family in Scotland, recalled that he discovered republicanism through a childhood reading of "Julius Caesar" from which Brutus emerged as the hero for his opposition to unrestrained

⁴¹ *People's Paper*, 3 July 1852, p. 7.

⁴² See *ibid.*, 22 May 1852, p. 4 and 28 May 1852, p. 4.

⁴³ See for these meetings *ibid.*, 3 July 1852, p. 7 and 19 June 1852, p. 7.

⁴⁴ See A.D. Taylor, "Modes of Political Expression and Working-Class Radicalism 1848–1880: The London and Manchester Examples" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 1992), chs 2–3 and for attempts to popularize the Lord Mayor's processions in the City during the 1880s, T.B. Smith, "In Defence of Privilege: The City of London and the Challenge of Municipal Reform 1875–1890", *Journal of Social History*, 27 (1993), pp. 59–83.

⁴⁵ See for this subversive aspect to the Working-Men's Tercentenary Committee the *Bee-Hive*, 30 January 1864, p. 6; 5 March 1864, p. 4; and 23 April 1864, p. 1.



Figure 2. *Punch* celebrating the demise of the crowd violence associated with the Reform League after the passage of the 1867 Reform Act (*Punch*, vol. 53, 30 November 1867, p. 221)



Figure 3. The planting of an oak tree during the ceremony on Primrose Hill in 1864 to commemorate the tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth (*The Illustrated London News*, 30 April 1864, p. 413)

imperial rule.⁴⁶ Above all Shakespeare was a defiantly plebeian figure. *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* wrote:

The people claim him as a man coming from them, a man whose progenitors tilled the soil and, with his own sickle, gathered the golden corn to his homestead.⁴⁷

Metropolitan reformers were accordingly able to exploit these radical connotations to destabilize the meaning of an essentially patriotic and above all “national” event.⁴⁸ The ceremony itself thus served as a pretext by which to reach and enlist the participation of a wider audience on Primrose Hill, where, once the main proceedings were over, radicals could convert the meeting into a pro-Garibaldi rally to protest against his recent expulsion from the country. This aspect of events was promptly

⁴⁶ See for the “Chartism in Shakespeare” column the *Northern Star*, 2 May 1840, p. 7 and 23 May 1840, p. 7 and for Carnegie's reminiscences, A. Carnegie, *Autobiography* (London, 1920), pp. 9–10.

⁴⁷ *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 24 April 1864, p. 1.

⁴⁸ John Breuilly has detected a similar pattern of events at the Hamburg Schiller commemoration of 1859 when the guilds attempted to set up their own separate ceremony. See his “The Schiller Centenary of 1859 in Hamburg” (paper delivered to the Manchester University Staff Seminar, 1990).

stopped by the police, leading to a major protest and causing the *Bee-Hive* to remark:

Their only reason for convening the meeting on Primrose Hill was the circumstance that several of the committee, and hundreds of those who were expected to take part in the meeting were also connected with the Shakespeare celebration to be held on the same ground at an earlier period of the day [. . .]. But no, Mr Inspector Stokes, acting under "general instructions", whilst willing to permit the memory of the dramatist of a past age to be honoured, objected to the tribute about to be made to a living hero, had interdicted, by threat of personal violence to the chairman, the holding of the Garibaldi meeting.⁴⁹

Indirectly the controversy surrounding the Primrose Hill meeting set in train the events that led to the foundation of the Reform League itself. George Howell recalled that meetings held to protest against the legality of the decision were the first in the series that led to the formation of the League the following year.⁵⁰ The fight against the authorities on this issue, which was led by Edmond Beales, was also responsible for conferring a celebrity status on him that made Beales the natural choice as leader of the new organization.

By the 1860s and 1870s there are clear indications that such conflicts with authority had intensified as the pressure upon the metropolitan open spaces increased. The dramatic expansion of radical activity in London in 1866–1867 during the Reform Bill crisis placed a major burden upon existing radical accommodation. In many cases the hire of public halls for rallies was so prohibitively expensive that the Reform League was forced back upon the open ground. This factor led to special pleading by League leaders on behalf of the right to meet in Hyde Park at the time of the 1866 disturbances. Thomas Mason Jones, a member of the League executive, wrote in an open letter to the Home Secretary in July:

You say you would not interfere with the meeting if it were held elsewhere, but I ask where are the masses of your unenfranchised countrymen to meet? Nearly all the open spaces of the metropolis have been enclosed [. . .]. Where then are the people to meet?⁵¹

Private landlord development in the West End also meant that squares like Lincoln's Inn Fields were effectively barred to public meetings or

⁴⁹ The *Bee-Hive*, 30 April 1864, p. 4. There are also accounts of this controversy in *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 24 April 1864, p. 3 and 1 May 1864, p. 4, and in the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 30 April 1864, p. 4.

⁵⁰ See on this point F.M. Leventhal, *George Howell and Victorian Working-Class Politics* (London, 1971), p. 49.

⁵¹ *The Times*, 23 July 1866. Similar sentiments were expressed by George Odger and George Howell on a deputation to the Home Secretary on the eve of the riots. See the *Morning Star*, 28 July 1866.

indeed any gatherings of the poor. Octavia Hill wrote of rich property developers who “will not even lend (the squares) one Saturday afternoon to the poor of their own district for a flower show”.⁵² Moreover, the continuing expansion of the capital’s suburbs, combined with a rapid building programme in the inner London area, resulted in a steady encroachment by builders and developers upon existing open land. By the 1860s many of London’s former fairground sites, amongst them Bethnal and Stepney greens, had vanished entirely.⁵³ Other open spaces were landscaped, developed and converted into public parks. In most cases this meant that they lost their original function as places of public assembly. Kennington Common, the site of the capital’s main Chartist demonstration in 1848, was drained and enclosed for recreational purposes in 1852.⁵⁴ By the 1870s it was London’s premier sports arena; in 1872 the first Football Association Cup Final was played there and today it is the site of the Oval Cricket Ground. In parks such as Victoria Park, Hackney, built on the site of the old radical meeting ground of Bonner’s Field, public meetings continued, but rights of access were hedged around with prohibitive by-laws that effectively tamed the older radical culture of the public assembly.⁵⁵ In the 1880s *The Radical* highlighted the continuing significance of this issue for Londoners. In 1881 a correspondent wrote of proposals by the Camberwell Vestry to transfer control of Peckham Rye, Goose Green and Nunhead Commons to the Metropolitan Board of Works:

If we go back thirty years we shall see how the liberty of the subject has been tampered with. Kennington Common and every available space that could be got hold of have been converted into parks – not that I disagree with the formation of parks, but I think a limit is desirable in this direction. We don’t want to see every bit of common enclosed with railings. Nor is it right that the right of public meeting should be edged about by endless restrictions. What with the refusal, from time to time, on the part of many proprietors of halls in the metropolis, coupled with police interference, we are rapidly approaching despotism and the extinction of genuine public opinion.⁵⁶

⁵² Hill, “Space for the People”, p. 94.

⁵³ There is a lament on the decline of the London fairground tradition, particularly “Glorious Old Stepney Fair”, in G. Sanger, *Seventy Years a Showman* (London, 1910; reprinted 1952), p. 141.

⁵⁴ See Conway, *People’s Parks*, pp. 24–25.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 188–191. There are comparatively few accounts of the development and eventual demise of individual meeting grounds, but for one useful survey of the fate of Copenhagen Fields see R. Quinault, “Outdoor Radicalism: Copenhagen Fields 1795–1851” (paper presented to the Metropolitan History Seminar, Institute of Historical Research, 18 January 1989).

⁵⁶ *The Radical*, 7 May 1881, p. 2; see for the continuing campaign for “freedom of speech” on Peckham Rye, *Liberty*, 28 April 1883, p. 2. The issue of access to prohibited open ground in London was also raised in *Justice*, 7 June 1884, p. 4.

As Edmond Beales pointed out in 1867, the consequences of such encroachments for metropolitan radicals were far more destabilizing than for their provincial counterparts in the major regional centres:

In or near such towns there are ordinarily numerous other open spaces in which people can hold their meetings – spaces which have not been built over as in the metropolis.⁵⁷

His comments highlight the different priorities involved in the conflict over space for reformers in the large urban centres of the north and midlands, and for those of the capital. As his remarks suggest, provincial radicals who found their access barred to places of assembly in the centre of the town could always go outside to meet freely on moorland or commons on the peripheries. This phenomenon had been occurring regularly from the earliest days of the post-Napoleonic War movements of political protest. The opening passage of Mrs Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, describing the farmland a mere half hour's walk from the centre of Manchester in the 1840s, demonstrates the proximity of such areas to the busy commercial districts of the major regional capitals.⁵⁸ In the 1870s and 1880s radicals from Leeds could still meet on Woodhouse Moor on the city's outskirts, whilst reformers from both Manchester and Yorkshire continued their meetings at Blackstone Edge in the Pennines well into the 1880s.⁵⁹ This factor dramatically reduced the potential for tension over straightforward issues of assembly in a provincial setting. In contrast, in a city of London's huge size metropolitan reformers had no such recourse to conveniently located open spaces outside the city's environs. In the 1870s, therefore, opposition in London to encroachment upon the capital's open ground, rather than diminishing, grew apace with new assaults upon areas of common land which were now targeted by builders, developers and the expanding railway companies.

The fiercest battles of the 1870s were thus fought over the large areas of unenclosed waste and common land to the north and south of the city where suburban development was planned. Nevertheless, the issues raised by the direction of these campaigns, gave a renewed impetus to flagging radical energies following the passage of the 1867 Reform Act,

⁵⁷ See his speech to the council of the Reform League on the Royal Parks Bill in the *Morning Star*, 25 July 1867.

⁵⁸ E. Gaskell, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (Manchester, 1848; new eds, London, 1970 and 1979), p. 39.

⁵⁹ See for the significance of Woodhouse Moor for the reformers of Leeds, Conway, *People's Parks*, p. 72 and the *Leeds Mercury*, 18 November 1871, p. 5; for an account of the Reform League demonstration there in 1866 see *The Annual Register 1866* (London, 1867), pp. 141–144. There is also an account of the meeting of the Manchester and Salford branches of the SDF in conscious emulation of the Chartists at Blackstone Edge in *Justice*, 12 May 1888, p. 6.

and ensured that they operated within a well-defined sphere of mass participatory political action.

In most instances the personalities and organizations involved were the same as those of previous radical campaigns. Surviving elements of the Reform League such as the Patriotic Club, Clerkenwell Green, and radical veterans, amongst them the former Chartist Thomas Bowkett and the secularist J. Baxter Langley, were at the forefront of this conflict. Ernest Jones' son, Llewellyn Atherley-Jones, fought his first legal cases as a young barrister in defence of convicted open space protesters.⁶⁰ Especially influential was the role of John de Morgan, an Irish veteran of Karl Marx's International Working Men's Association, who gained a reputation during the 1870s as the champion of the common lands against an intrusive state, bureaucracy and police. Like Charles Bradlaugh and Edmond Beales in the 1850s and 1860s, De Morgan first came to public notice after attempts to secure rights of access to the metropolitan open spaces. In 1872 he was tried and fined for his involvement in disturbances following a forced entry by reformers into Hyde Park to demonstrate against the detention of Fenian prisoners involved in the uprisings in Ireland of 1867.⁶¹ His career therefore represents a recurrent pattern within metropolitan radicalism, and demonstrates the continuing centrality of this issue for radicals in the capital into the 1870s and beyond. In 1875–1876 he orchestrated major protests against the enclosure of Hackney Downs and Plumstead Marshes to the east of London, and against attempts to restrict access to Wimbledon Common in the centre and Chislehurst in Kent to the south.⁶²

Some of this activity overlapped with that of the liberal dominated Commons Preservation Society which boasted the support of John Stuart Mill, Octavia Hill and Henry Fawcett, and was influential in the defence of Swiss Cottage Fields in particular.⁶³ Nevertheless, such organizations resolutely eschewed the confrontational tactics that plebeian reformers such as De Morgan had made their own. By concentrating upon the pressure group tactics of moral persuasion they effectively cut themselves off from the mainstream of advanced radical opinion in the capital on this issue. Moreover, this avenue of protest led eventually to the quietist approach to matters of environmental concern that in later years came to characterize organizations such as the National Footpaths Preservation

⁶⁰ See for Atherley-Jones' role in the defence of the Plumstead rioters the *Kentish Mercury*, 28 October 1876, p. 3.

⁶¹ See the *National Reformer*, 17 November 1872, pp. 315–316 and 24 November 1872, pp. 330–331.

⁶² There are full accounts of John de Morgan's activities in S. St Clair, *Sketch of the Life and Labours of John de Morgan* (pamphlet, Leeds, 1880), especially pp. 7–11 and *Who is John de Morgan? A Few Words of Explanation by a Free and Independent Elector of Leicester* (pamphlet, London, 1877), pp. 7–8.

⁶³ See Hill, "Space for the People", p. 89.

Society and the National Trust.⁶⁴ In many ways the involvement of such bodies as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in the creation of nature sanctuaries and reserves, rather than opening up the countryside, merely further restricted access to it. At Epping Forest and elsewhere the Commons Preservation Society was more enthusiastic than the vestries in attempting to clear away traditional pastimes and recreations from the open ground.⁶⁵ In contrast the working-class protests organized by De Morgan retained a strongly radical character and employed “direct action” tactics that, in the manner of the defence of the rights of public meeting in Hyde Park, brought them into open confrontation with the police and civil authorities. They were also characterized by a vigorous use of language, knowledge of the lore relating to the appropriation of land during the Norman Conquest, and hostility to the police, that served to set them apart from the activities of their middle-class counterparts. Most of these features are displayed in accounts of opposition to the enclosure of Hackney Downs:

Mr De Morgan addressed those present. He described enclosures which had recently been made and which he asserted were wholly illegal, at the same time adding that their removal would be a perfectly legal act. The fences which they saw before them had been erected in defiance of popular feeling, and rights of way were being stopped which had existed from time immemorial. In these circumstances [. . .] the only means of getting back their rights was to remove the fences without delay. The people advanced to the iron railings where they were first obstructed by about thirty constables [. . .] and seemed as if they were about to protect the enclosure. The superintendent, however, said a few words to them. The staves were put up and the crowd allowed to proceed with the work of demolition.⁶⁶

Similar demonstrations at Eel Brook Common in Fulham in 1878 show these invasions to have been genuine expressions of community outrage, in which both women and children participated, and after which the leaders were fêted by the crowd:

A gentlemanly dressed young man then took round his hat for beer money for the active destroyers of the fence, even asking the policemen themselves for a contribution.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ See on this point J. Ranlett, “Checking Nature’s Desecration: Late Victorian Environmental Organisations”, *Victorian Studies*, 26 (1983), pp. 197–222 and R. Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London, 1993), pp. 288–312; for the reminiscences of the chief organizer of the Commons Preservation Society see G.J. Shaw-Lefevre, *English Commons and Forest: The Story of the Battle During the Last Thirty Years for Public Rights over the Commons and Forests of England and Wales* (London, 1894; new ed, 1910), pp. 23–25 and 39–40.

⁶⁵ See R. Hunter, *The Preservation of Commons* (pamphlet, London, 1880), pp. 14–15.

⁶⁶ *Annual Register 1875* (London, 1876), p. 121. The public meetings that led up to the confrontation at Hackney are described in the *East London Observer*, 30 October 1875, p. 6 and 11 December 1875, p. 7. The riots at the common are lampooned in “A Fytte of Hackney Downs”, in *Punch*, vol. 69, 25 December 1875, p. 271.

⁶⁷ See an account of the occupation of Eel Brook Common in *The English Labourers’ Chronicle*, 23 March 1878, p. 5.

At Sydenham in 1867 and Plumstead Common in 1876 where access to traditional paths and bridle-ways used by the community was restricted the homes of prominent enclosers were attacked by the crowd.⁶⁸ At Plumstead the targeting of the house of an encloser who was Jewish carried suggestions of the anti-semitism that frequently surfaced in metropolitan crowd action of this type.⁶⁹

Moreover, the outward trappings and rhetoric of De Morgan's anti-enclosure movement were underscored by many older radical assumptions and ideas. At Wimbledon Common attempts by the local aristocratic families who acted as "conservators" of the common to prevent radical meetings on the site enabled De Morgan to employ a long-standing rhetoric of opposition to corruption within central and local government against the authorities in charge.⁷⁰ His speech on this occasion was shot through with an extravagant blend of biblical metaphor and anti-aristocratic imagery that recalled the Chartist orators at their height. The radical *People's Advocate* reported on his remarks to a crowd of 20,000 on the common:

In strong language the lecturer [De Morgan] denounced those who could sit in their cushioned pews and hear read "cursed be he who removes his neighbour's landmark" and then on Monday enclose by a wall a piece of common land.⁷¹

The vehemence of the language used on these occasions recalls the vocabulary of the early nineteenth-century critics of enclosure. There are strong echoes of the poet John Clare's "commons-eaters" in attacks in John Buckmaster's radical autobiography on the conspiracy of "land-grabbers", "jerry-builders" and "commons-stealers" who wished "to join hands on the last square foot of turf".⁷² Other enemies of the anti-enclosers were among the popular folk-demons of traditional radical politics. Long-standing suspicion of the military as an anti-democratic force was channelled into opposition to their monopoly of Plumstead Common for military exercises, which resulted in a frequent closing of the common to public recreations.⁷³ Lawyers also occupied a notable position as popular hate-objects. In the 1870s the legal profession became a target for attack after their collusion in the rewriting of the 1866

⁶⁸ See the *Bee-Hive*, 12 October 1867, p. 3 and the *Kentish Mercury*, 8 July 1876, p. 3.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4. For the role of anti-semitism in London crowd politics see M.B. Baer, *Theatre and Disorder in Late Georgian London* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 189–221.

⁷⁰ See for full accounts of the long-running struggle to regain rights of access to Wimbledon Common the *People's Advocate*, 24 July 1875, p. 8; 31 July 1875, p. 5; and 7 August 1875, p. 5.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 18 September 1875, p. 5.

⁷² John Buckmaster has left the only full first-hand account of the movement of opposition to enclosure in London in the 1870s in an account of his radical career in the capital. See J. Buckmaster, *A Village Politician: The Life Story of John Buckley* (London, 1897; reprinted 1982), pp. 303–337.

⁷³ See the *Kentish Mercury*, 13 May 1876, p. 3.

Metropolitan Commons Act, which notionally prohibited the enclosure of commons within a fifteen-mile radius of Charing Cross, but which was frequently circumvented by lawyers in government employ. At a demonstration on Plumstead Common in 1876, J. Baxter Langley condemned their role in the following terms:

We are here to celebrate the right of the people to maintain their interest in Plumstead Common, as against the combination of lawyers and others who had attempted to pillage the people.⁷⁴

De Morgan's role as an anti-encloser also led him to be compared to an older generation of radical heroes, particularly Oliver Cromwell, who had opposed the enclosures involved in the draining of the Fens.⁷⁵ His own journal, *De Morgan's Monthly*, made much of these older radical associations, running regular features on the "Norman Yoke" imposed on the Anglo-Saxons after the Norman Conquest, the Chartists, and the Peasants' Rising of 1381.⁷⁶ At Plumstead he compared his followers to the peasant rebels of 1381 under their leader Wat Tyler, and the police to the unjust royal authority they had opposed:

He knew that Wat Tyler was a man of Kent and that the basis of all his agitation was the right of the people to the commons. Wat Tyler assembled 40,000 or 50,000 of the men of Kent and it was only by treachery on the neighbouring Blackheath that the king was enabled to conquer the men of Kent. No number of detectives in plain clothes could injure their cause. The mark of the beast was upon them.⁷⁷

Many of the fears of the plebeian defenders of the commons came to centre upon the great areas of forested land adjoining London. These were traditional destinations for excursions and day-trips by the denizens of the slum districts of the East End. Epping Forest in particular was known as "the East Londoner's Forest" on these grounds. Traditions of public access at Epping Forest were fortified by ancestral memories of the Londoner's customary right to hunt in the forest, which until well into the nineteenth century were annually affirmed by "burlesque hunts" staged at Easter by the East End poor.⁷⁸ Issues of access at Epping were also associated in the public mind with local commoners' rights to gather and lop wood. Technically Epping Forest was Crown Land held in trust and administered on behalf of the state by a cartel of gentry families. Encroachments by the lord of the manor of Loughton upon land in Epping, however, had resulted in the enclosure of Waltham

⁷⁴ *De Morgan's Monthly*, 15 November 1876, p. 28.

⁷⁵ See St Clair, *Sketch of the Life and Labours of John de Morgan*, pp. 7–8.

⁷⁶ See in particular *De Morgan's Monthly*, 1 September 1876, p. 3; 1 January 1877, p. 35; and 2 April 1877, pp. 54–55.

⁷⁷ *Kentish Mercury*, 15 July 1876, p. 3.

⁷⁸ W. Besant, *East London* (London, 1901), pp. 291–292.

and Hainault Forests by 1860. These actions remained uncontested by either Crown or government, but generated considerable opposition in London itself. In 1866–1867 branches of the Reform League regularly visited Epping Forest to protest against the enclosures. By 1870 this opposition had become systematized; fences were broken down and mass trespasses organized at rallies in the capital.⁷⁹ Public sentiment on this issue was strong. A.S. Ayrton, Gladstone's Commissioner of Works and Buildings, was held personally responsible for the encroachments, and in 1874 the issue contributed to his election defeat at Tower Hamlets.⁸⁰ In 1875 the Corporation of the City of London sought to end the controversy by purchasing the remaining acres of the forest from the Crown and maintaining them as a protected area of woodland.⁸¹ For many reformers this was a less than satisfactory outcome. Commoners' rights to gather wood were neither safeguarded nor compensated, generating a vigorous campaign around this issue that again placed plebeian radicals outside the sphere of contemporary liberal politics. For most working-class reformers the issues involved reinforced existing impressions of a greedy, feudalistic regime that, aided and abetted by a Liberal government, coveted and mismanaged land held in sacred trust for the people. This attitude emerged strongly during the republican campaign of 1870–1872; the former Chartist W.E. Adams, writing in the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, attacked both Crown and government on this basis and opposed plans to restore the Crown Lands to the monarchy. He remarked:

The lands which had really been filched from the people, and which were technically held by the royal family in former times, have been so managed as to restore little to the Exchequer. Hainault Forest is gone; Epping Forest is partly gone; the New Forest is going [. . .] The country is little disposed to overlook the general result of a bargain which exposes it to increasing demands on the part of the royal family.⁸²

The strong element of martyrdom within the movement for the preservation of the commons anchors it firmly within the context of previous movements of radical agitation. At Epping Forest, local cottagers who exercised their long-standing rights of access to cut timber were arrested, interned and released amidst displays of community acclamation. The death of the son of one of the protagonists in gaol caused outrage and

⁷⁹ See for a report of a mass trespass at Epping the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 5 February 1870, p. 4 and for a public meeting on the issue the *Bee-Hive*, 8 July 1871, p. 4.

⁸⁰ See the *International Herald*, 9 November 1872, p. 6 and *The Times*, 31 January 1874, p. 7.

⁸¹ *Annual Register 1875* (London, 1876), p. 95 and *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 7 May 1882, p. 8.

⁸² *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 29 July 1871, p. 4. Sir Charles Dilke also referred to this issue in a speech to the inaugural meeting of the Land Tenure Reform Association. See *Speeches by Sir Charles Dilke* (pamphlet, London, 1872), pp. 32–38.

a series of demonstrations by metropolitan radicals.⁸³ John Buckmaster recalled a similar incident resulting from the disputes surrounding access to the commons near Charing Cross. An internee who was released on bail following a disturbance on the heath was given a triumphal progress from the prison to the scene of the riot:

When his companions heard of his release they procured a van and decorated it with ribbons, laurels, evergreens and flowers. An armchair was placed in the centre for the prisoner. A band of music arrived at the prison gates, and the prisoner was received with hearty expressions of sympathy and goodwill. The band, with van and procession, moved slowly to the scene of the late battle, for which the man had suffered ten days' imprisonment. The procession stopped for as long as the police permitted it in front of the houses of the commons-stealers and played, almost to the bursting of their instruments "See the Conquering Hero Comes" with occasional yells of "Who stole the common?"⁸⁴

John de Morgan was himself part of the pantheon of open space martyrs. In 1876–1877 his open defiance of authority, seventeen-day imprisonment after riots at Plumstead Heath, and time spent on the run, resulted in his elevation to the status of a martyr figure for the metropolitan reform community as a whole. During his internment for his part in these disturbances, he addressed his followers from Maidstone Gaol and outlined his sufferings in a manner that indicated an intense awareness of this role, and recalled the Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor's similar pronouncements from York Castle in 1840. As with O'Connor and other Chartists like J.R. Stephens he also used his journal, *De Morgan's Monthly*, as a vehicle both to advertise his sufferings and to enthuse and inspire his followers during his absence.⁸⁵ Under these circumstances, like previous movements of radical protest, the cult of martyrdom became an institutionalized and highly visible aspect of the metropolitan public access movement.

Concern for the preservation of the metropolitan open spaces was a major radical *cause célèbre* throughout the middle years of the nineteenth century. In a city of London's huge dimensions access to open space was essential for the maintenance of an effective, plebeian, campaigning style. The violence associated with this campaign meant, however, that many middle-class liberals were unsympathetic towards this agitation. For the residual reform bodies that survived Chartism, the issue of the public spaces in the capital accordingly raised a separate agenda whose needs could not be met effectively by liberalism, and that required a separate degree of organization and activity to sustain. In a London

⁸³ See J. Marsh, *Back to The Land: The Pastoral Impulse in Victorian England from 1880–1914* (London, 1982), pp. 45–48 and discussion of this episode in E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London, 1991), pp. 141–143.

⁸⁴ Buckmaster, *A Village Politician*, pp. 317–319.

⁸⁵ See for De Morgan's address to his followers from Maidstone Gaol *De Morgan's Monthly*, 15 November 1876, p. 20.

context the radical strategy of direct action and confrontation with the authorities meant that reformers were ideally placed to rally the unrepentant former Chartist and ultra-radical constituency around this long-established metropolitan concern. This aspect of reform politics in the capital gave radicalism a qualitatively different style from equivalent agitations in the regions. Sporadic outbreaks of disorder at such commons as Putney, Wandsworth and Banstead thus continued to be a marked feature of demonstrations against enclosure until the eve of the Great War. A strident note of dissonance with liberalism was thereby injected into metropolitan radicalism that left the way open for a separate degree of organization and activity for plebeian reformers around this issue. This in itself helps account for the relatively loose moorings of organized political liberalism in the capital, and the stubborn persistence here of a skein of independent radical thought outside liberalism into the 1880s and beyond.