The Little Circle and Manchester Politics, 1812-46

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David J Knott

School of Arts, Languages and Cultures
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### Abbreviations

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<td>American Historical Review</td>
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Abstract

This thesis argues that a group of eleven reformers who worked and lived in Manchester, known throughout this study as the Little Circle, presented a unique understanding of how middle-class public opinion should be formulated and how it should respond to various political issues between 1812 and 1846. Using a range of sources including newspapers, personal papers and administrative records, this thesis furthers our understanding of how a group of Nonconformists and self-described middle-class and liberal reformers attempted to effect political change in Manchester. Historians of extra-parliamentary politics during the early nineteenth century have predominantly focused on working-class radical enterprises that sought to influence political change through mass popular political participation. The way the members of the Circle reacted to the events of Peterloo (1819) informed the way they thought extra-parliamentary politics should be managed and conducted. Unlike the working-class radicals who relied on mass popular participation and the use of large outdoor meetings, this thesis shows that the members of the Little Circle utilised forums such as the press and indoor public meetings to express their political voice.

Importantly, this thesis argues that the use of the press and indoor public meetings were forums through which the Circle believed a small and rational public, that was composed of middle-class men, could successfully represent the political interests of their fellow townsmen. Public opinion, from the Circle’s perspective, had to reflect the intelligent and rational segments of their community. As this thesis argues, the use of indoor public meetings in particular was a defining characteristic of how middle-class public opinion was generated in Manchester. While the use of small indoor public meetings worked effectively in Manchester in the period leading up to the passage of the 1832 Reform Act, these tactics were challenged in the late 1830s and 1840s. Additionally, this thesis argues that after 1832, when Manchester was enfranchised and granted two MPs, the locus for the formation of middle-class public opinion shifted to partisan forums or those necessitating more formalised and permanent organisational structures, as in the case of single-issue campaigns. In this sense, this study highlights that there was an important transition in the way middle-class reformers such as the Circle approached and thought about ways in which extra-parliamentary politics should now be directed.
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Introduction

This thesis is about a group of eleven political reformers, known collectively as the ‘Little Circle’, who lived and worked in early nineteenth-century Manchester. This band of reformers was highly influential in terms of both their understanding of public opinion and in their involvement in key political issues between 1812 and 1846. The group had a clear self-identity as well as a coherent set of ideas. One member, the cotton manufacturer and MP for Wigan between 1832 and 1836, Richard Potter (1772-1848), declared in 1836 that he was part of ‘a small but intrepid band arrayed in all the vigour of freedom in opposition to local as well as national abuses, and he hesitated not for one moment at joining them’.\(^1\) Another member of the Little Circle, the Scottish journalist, free trader, reformer and political activist Archibald Prentice (1792-1857), later recalled his earlier involvement ‘with a little circle of men’ who ‘threw the shield of their protection over the intended victims of a government oppression’.\(^2\)

Considering that both of these observations were written retrospectively, it could be suggested that the concept of being a member of the Little Circle was less evident at the time. However, it also clear that both Potter and Prentice believed that a political group existed in Manchester between 1812 and 1846 who were actively involved in their town’s extra-parliamentary activities, and dedicated to defending the interests of their town and confronting abuses perpetrated by political officials.

Aside from Archibald Prentice and Richard Potter there were nine other members of the Circle: John Edward Taylor (1791-1844), Thomas Potter (1773-1845), Joseph Brotherton (1783-1857), who became MP for Salford 1832-1857, William Harvey (1787-1870), Fenton Robinson Atkinson (1784-1859), John Benjamin Smith (1794-1879), who was MP for Stirling

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\(^1\) *Manchester Times*, 16 April 1836.

\(^2\) Archibald Prentice, *Historical Sketches and Personal Recollections of Manchester Intended to Illustrate the Progress of Public Opinion 1792 to 1832* (London, 1851), p. 73. (Emphasis my own)
Burghs between 1847-1852 and later Stockport from 1852 until 1868, Absalom Watkin (1787-1861), John Shuttleworth (1786-1864) and Edward Baxter (1779-1856). Several members of this group were highly successful cotton and textile merchants and manufacturers, while others pursued careers in the law and journalism. The professional and commercial backgrounds of the members of the Circle provided them with the money, time and skills to focus on various political and social issues of their day. Alongside political allies such as Mark Philips, who became one of Manchester’s first MPs in 1832, and the textile manufacturer Robert Hyde Greg, the members of the Circle made a visible and significant contribution to the political life and formation of public opinion in their town.

This thesis is primarily a local study of the political situation in Manchester and in neighbouring towns such as Salford and Wigan between 1812 and 1846. Manchester’s political culture was not necessarily unique. Reformers in other towns across Britain deployed similar political tactics as the members of the Circle. The key means by which the Little Circle influenced Manchester politics – newspapers and indoor public meetings – were often used by reformers in urban centres such as Leeds, Sheffield and Liverpool. However, Manchester held a special significance in this period as it was the site of the Peterloo massacre of 1819. This event turned Manchester into a symbolic site for the commemoration of the political struggle for parliamentary reform. Middle-class reformers such as the members of the Circle had to define their political activities in a town that became synonymous with a great working-class political

struggle. Yet as radicals flocked to Manchester annually to pay homage to the victims of Peterloo, the members of the Circle and their allies attempted to craft an alternative political programme that differentiated them from working-class radicalism. Importantly, this thesis explains that the Circle’s members were able to influence the development of future liberal political programmes in a town dominated by class division and clashing middle-class ideas about how to promote reform. Vic Gatrell has described Manchester as a town ‘notorious for the intensity of class division’ with a striking presence of ‘middle-class political concerns’. These political concerns were sometimes conflicting, reflecting different priorities, traditions and ideas. Even a cohesive and coherent group like the Circle contained competing opinions about different political objectives.

Manchester has often been regarded by historians as the birth-place of nineteenth-century liberal politics. For example, Michael Turner has observed that the members of the Circle were the ‘precursors and prophets’ who created the ‘climate of opinion’ that gave birth to the Anti-Corn Law League and allowed them to be ‘effective’. Manchester reformers such as the members of the Circle fostered the expansion of influential liberal political campaigns like the League and Richard Cobden’s ‘Manchester School’. The activities of the members of the Circle in Manchester are important because they help broaden our understanding of how liberal political opinions and extra-parliamentary tactics developed in early nineteenth-century Britain. In contrast to the work of Turner, this study does not present the activities of the Circle as interesting only in terms of establishing a genealogy to the later activities of the Anti-Corn Law League and the ‘Manchester School’. Rather, this thesis makes the argument that the Circle pushed middle-class reforming ideas to the forefront of public debate in Manchester.

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during the early nineteenth century. I argue that the members of the Circle believed public opinion and political change should be driven by a small and rational body of people comprised mainly from the wealthier sections of the middle class. Although the members of the Circle were not the only middle-class reformers in Manchester in the early nineteenth century, they were the most active and vocal in local politics. While the Circle criticised other members of Manchester’s middle class for being apathetic and disconnected from political and social issues, the group made a concerted effort to both broadcast their own political opinions and influence the views of others. This thesis describes how the members of the Circle were significant political figures who helped establish a clear and definitive middle-class political presence in Manchester’s local political culture.

The members of the Circle were central protagonists in various political and social debates in Manchester between 1812, when they first involved themselves in public meetings held in Manchester, and 1846, which was the year when the Corn Laws were ultimately repealed. During this period, political debate and activity revolved around issues such as parliamentary reform, Catholic emancipation, municipal reform, the abolition of slavery, factory regulation and the revision of the Poor Law. This thesis argues that the members of the Circle offered a new brand of middle-class politics that has hitherto been obscured in the historiography of early nineteenth-century extra-parliamentary activity. The members of the Circle shared many characteristics with other reformers across Britain in the early nineteenth century: namely, that they were typically men of industry or commerce and came from Protestant Dissenting or Nonconformist backgrounds. But in other ways these reformers were unique. For example, the majority of the members of the Circle were Unitarians: a religious affiliation whose members placed a heavy emphasis on progress and rationality. Another unique aspect of this group of

7 Turner, Reform and Respectability, p. 333.
reformers was their commitment to utilising existing local political institutions such as the Vestry, Police Commission and the Court Leet, although they were also willing to criticise such institutions as being unrepresentative of the public and inefficient.\footnote{A. Redford, The History of Local Government in Manchester (London, 1939); D. Fraser, Urban Politics in Victorian England: The Structure of Politics in Victorian Cities (Leicester, 1976).}

The members of the Circle also used the press to comment on and influence public opinion surrounding various political and social issues of their day. The members of the Circle were connected to two local newspapers. The Manchester Guardian was founded in 1821 with the financial assistance of the Potter brothers and edited by John Edward Taylor. Prentice was the first editor of the Manchester Times, which was first published in 1828 and also financed through the assistance of the brothers, Richard and Thomas Potter. Having two newspaper editors amongst the Circle’s membership allowed the group to voice their political opinions in print as well as at public meetings. This thesis argues that the Circle’s significance in politics in Manchester between 1812 and 1846 was defined by their capacity to articulate public opinion in newspapers and forums such as the indoor public meeting. By doing so, this study helps to further our understanding of how public opinion was imagined and formulated in Manchester during this period. A study of the Little Circle enriches our understanding of a number of key historiographical debates about early nineteenth-century Britain relating to social class, the idea of the public sphere, popular politics, ‘reform’ and party politics.
Social Class

The intersection of new class identities with politics – and particularly with political reform – is a long running theme in the historiography of early nineteenth-century Britain. This thesis adds a further dimension to the way we view the development of a middle-class social and political identity in the years before and after the 1832 Reform Act. Historians associated with the ‘linguistic turn’ of the 1990s such as Gareth Stedman Jones, Patrick Joyce and Dror Wahrman have argued that class was a linguistic construct rather than a socio-economic entity. Stedman Jones in particular argued that political consciousness could not be understood from social conditions and the collective interests of a group: thus the Chartists needed to be studied through the complex interweave of ‘political languages’ that they shared with one another. Joyce additionally cautioned us that while people may have shared the ‘consciousness of a class’ this was not proof of the ‘consciousness of class’. According to this analysis, Chartism and radicalism did not reflect a new working-class identity, rather they drew on an eighteenth-century political tradition which was premised on an excluded people


and an unrepresentative government. Though Joyce was primarily interested in working people, his analysis also helps us to understand members of middle-class groups such as the Circle in terms of ideology and the ‘consciousness of a class’. This thesis builds upon such insights to contribute to our understanding of middle-class identity, which historians such as Alan Kidd and David Nicholls have identified as being constructed from a ‘constellation of meanings, standing alongside gender, race, nation, generation, place, custom’. By examining the members of the Circle during this period, this thesis helps to advance our interpretation of what it meant to be middle class in early nineteenth-century Manchester.

The members of the Circle exhibited many of the same characteristics of the broader middle-class in Manchester. Devotion to charitable works, education, civic improvement and leisure pursuits such as walking, reading, horticulture, science and literature were common interests shared by both the members of the Circle and the wider middle class in Manchester. However, this study also demonstrates the ways in which the Circle’s members were unique among middle-class groups in Manchester. They stood apart because of their attitude and approach to politics and, especially, the formation of public opinion. The members of the Circle appeared to be the most vocal and prominent middle-class political figures in Manchester before 1832 and remained prominent thereafter. The Circle’s devotion to deliberative indoor public meetings and the use of the press to articulate public opinion were emblematic of their middle-class public and political identity. Yet after 1832 middle-class led political movements, such as the Anti-Corn Law League, adopted tactics that differed from those harnessed by the members of the Circle.

14 Turner, Reform and Respectability, pp. 120-1.
There were two fundamental ways that the League’s extra-parliamentary tactics stood apart from the Circle. Firstly, although not Chartists or radicals, the League thought the most effective way to achieve their political objectives was through popular or mass mobilisation as part of an organised campaign. Whereas the Circle were always uncomfortable with large public meetings that went beyond their preference for small, deliberative debates, the League embraced mass politics. Secondly, while the Circle notionally appealed to a wider public, not just the middle class, the League in its earliest guises was unmistakably a vehicle for the views of businessmen, industrialists and especially their perceived economic interests. The emergence of popular movements such as the Anti-Corn Law League in Manchester led to a re-interpretation of what it meant to lead middle-class public opinion in this town.

My thesis sheds new light on how we comprehend the development of separate middle-class and working-class political identities prior and subsequent to the passage of the 1832 Reform Act: which, as has been noted, is a subject that has long interested historians.15 Wahrman suggested that the 1832 Reform Act was a political consequence of growing middle-class sensibilities. He has argued that ‘developments which unfolded in the political arena – in inscribing the category of “middle class” so broadly onto the most fundamental ways in which social experiences were organised and constructed’.16 In addition, James Thompson has stated that the ‘Reform Act undoubtedly did much to establish a benchmark of middle classness and to shape middle-class self-image. It reaffirmed the importance of property and the concomitant


16 Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class*, p. 408.
possession of political “intelligence” in entitling people to vote’. Thompson further contended that the 1832 Act’s ‘main impact was to enshrine the language of respectability at the heart of political discussion’. Yet this thesis argues that the idea that the 1832 Reform Act created the middle class is reductive. If we look at the Little Circle’s activities before 1832, it becomes clear that there was a conscious effort on their behalf to foster a middle-class political identity before reform. As this thesis shows, the middle class in Manchester was created through a complex and gradual synthesis of political actions and expressions. The political activities of the members of the Circle between 1812 and 1846 indicated that political change could be effected through rational and deliberative political discussion. These aspects of the Circle’s political thinking and actions help us to define what it meant to be a respectable and middle-class reformer in early nineteenth-century Manchester, which did not just hinge upon the political results of the 1832 Reform Act.

**Reform**

Most studies of early nineteenth-century British political history have examined the concept of ‘reform’ in relation to the details of legislation, elite political manoeuvrings and mass popular political action. Joanna Innes has observed that the word reform referred to a variety of different political projects such as parliamentary reform, prison reform, factory reform and poor law reform. Derek Beales on the other hand has noted that the word reform was utilised specifically in relation to the idea of parliamentary reform. Less attention however has been paid to visions of ‘reform’ that existed outside Parliament and London: notably, in relation to

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universal suffrage, votes by ballot and linking the vote to a certain standard of education. This study establishes that the Circle’s understanding of the concept of parliamentary reform was also intimately connected with ideas of moral and social improvement. My thesis argues that the members of the Circle believed that reform was a gradual process that was inextricably linked to the rationalisation of existing political institutions; but also firmly connected to the improvement of ‘the people’ who were expected to utilise them. In essence, this thesis combines two strands that are usually studied separately: namely, the reform of political institutions and the moral reform of individuals.

A focus on the Little Circle’s attitudes and approach towards the idea of reform, during this period under consideration, helps develop our understanding of how ideas of parliamentary reform were linked to moral improvement and education. Historians have clearly shown that the desire for moral and intellectual improvement was a distinctive feature of middle-class thinking during the early nineteenth century. Yet in the minds of the members of the Circle, political institutions could only work to represent the best interests of their community if the people who participated in them were intelligent and well versed in political and social matters. M.J.D. Roberts has argued that moral reform was ‘a weapon in the cultural armoury of an emergent urban middle-class, and of its professional and commercial elites in particular’. Roberts added that through ‘discourse the elites made sense of their own obligation to others

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in a fluid and unstable culture; they also helped to convince significant numbers of their own and of other classes to see the world in a particular hierarchical yet community-seeking-way’.21

Mark Hampton has also suggested that throughout the early nineteenth century, the ‘elite classes perceived a crucial gap between themselves and the popular classes’. Elites, he concluded, ‘generally did not believe themselves to need political education’.22 From the perspective of the members of the Circle, they were the ones in possession of a higher standard of morals and intellect. As a result, the members of the Circle concluded that they were in the best position to lead public opinion and represent the political interests of others. But at the same time, the members of the Little Circle believed that it was important to make concerted attempts to educate and improve the moral and intellectual condition of the working class. This could be achieved through various voluntary enterprises, schools, lectures as well as tools such as the press and parliamentary guides and compendiums.23

Often the members of the Circle criticised the working class for excessive drinking, violence and gambling.24 Crucially, because most people had not yet reached the same moral and intellectual standards of the members of the Circle, it was suggested that the bulk of the

population should be indefinitely denied access to the public sphere, or at least the right to vote. The members of the Little Circle did not possess democratic ideals, which demanded that every person should be included in the franchise. For the members of the Circle, parliamentary reform was part of a larger and longer process of moral and intellectual improvement. Analysing such views, especially when they emanated from participants who have been neglected in the historiography, provides a new layer to existing understandings of reform as an idea.

**The Public and the People**

This thesis makes a further significant historical contribution by examining how the Circle defined ‘the people’ and ‘the public’. The Circle’s idea of ‘the public’ was limited in its constitution, and restricted in the main part to those who mirrored their own cultural and political interests. The Circle’s understanding of ‘the public’ was not new, and instead built on eighteenth-century developments in political thinking which placed the public and public opinion centre-stage when thinking about the performance of politics. My thesis utilises the concept of the ‘bourgeois Public Sphere’ developed by Jürgen Habermas as an analytical tool to explore the Little Circle’s conception of the public and its role in Manchester political life between 1812 and 1846. Habermas described the public sphere as a physical and ideological construct within which a rational and intelligent body of people could come together and interact through the press and other social spaces such as debating societies, salons and coffee houses to criticise figures of public authority anonymously. Habermas suggested that a self-conscious bourgeois and reasoning public emerged during the late eighteenth century in England.25

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The press was one place where this transformation was evident. Hannah Barker, for example, has argued that ‘the relationship between newspapers and public opinion in late eighteenth-century England’ was not just that the press reflected public sentiment, but that ‘newspapers also acted in some way to construct the identity of the public themselves’.26 This thesis also argues that the press in Manchester helped produce a vision of the public during the early nineteenth century. I argue that the *Manchester Guardian* and *Manchester Times* represented a visible reasoning and politically astute middle-class public in Manchester.

Aside from the press, this thesis argues that public meetings held in Manchester were a further forum through which the identity of a small and reasoning public was formed. The Circle’s members also believed that the public – that is to say that section of the population that should debate and decide public opinion – had to be composed of intelligent and literate men capable of rational discussion, with women omitted from this construction and formulation of middle-class public opinion in Manchester. Indoor public meetings in Manchester played an important role in the formation of a masculine and middle-class political and social identity. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have noted that gender and class always operate together, and that consciousness of class always takes a gendered form. In addition, they have highlighted that ‘middle-classness’ as a social identity did not derive from the arenas of politics or commerce, but rather from their adherence to a particular form of domesticity. Though they also see men’s active role in various public and occupational activities also serving to shape their gendered and class identities, their focus is on men’s integral role in the home.27

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Since Davidoff and Hall’s release of *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*, historians have argued that there has been too much focus on the dichotomy between public and private spheres. John Tosh has emphasised that men negotiated a variety of different spaces including the home, their occupation and other public activities. In each of these spaces, according to Tosh, men behaved differently according to the varying contexts in which they operated.\(^{28}\) Others have highlighted the importance of other homosocial spheres – spaces where men gathered and interacted with one another – through which authentic expressions of middle-class masculinity could be established. They have also shown how the boundaries between private and public spheres were often blurred and transgressed.\(^{29}\) Matthew McCormack has argued that the separate spheres orthodoxy is inflexible,\(^ {30}\) Whilst Matthew Cragoe has noted that women had a clear role to play in politics in the mid nineteenth century. Although women were forced ‘out of participation in organised politics by a newly respectable, mid-Victorian political culture figured around the respectable man and his devoted family’, this did not ‘necessarily diminish their practical influence in electoral politics’, he claims. Aristocratic and middle-class women were directly involved in canvassing, ‘routinely coordinated the social politics of elections, managing people and social activities for political ends’.\(^ {31}\) Although aristocratic and middle-class women might have had a role to play in various


political activities during the nineteenth century, their role in indoor public meetings in Manchester was non-existent.

Whilst recent scholarship has shown that men performed masculinity at home, at work and in homosocial environments, such as gentleman’s clubs, in Parliament and at election meetings, indoor public meetings have been overlooked. Although my thesis does not add any new insights into the historiography of masculinities in early nineteenth-century Britain, it does argue that the domain of the indoor public meeting, which has hitherto been relatively neglected in the historiography of popular politics in this period, was a forum through which a distinct bourgeois and masculine public and political identity was constructed. These indoor public meetings provided a setting through which a small group of middle-class men were able to demonstrate their capacity to represent the political interests of all people in Manchester.

The Circle assigned themselves the role of articulators, leaders and representatives of public opinion, which was constituted through deliberative public meetings and the press. While Habermas’s study used eighteenth-century England as the basis for his historical analysis, a study of the Circle offers a later and further example of the formation of public opinion and the public sphere. This thesis argues that those individuals who attended town meetings and read newspapers such as the *Manchester Times* and *Manchester Guardian* formed a rational and intelligent bourgeois public who were able to deliberate with one another so that they could represent and form public opinion. This thesis shows that the Circle’s idea of ‘the public’ was also a flexible concept that was not entirely dependent on one’s wealth, status and occupation. Rather ‘the public’ was a rational and intelligent community who were engaged and fluent with

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the numerous political and social issues of the day. Importantly, the way the members of the Circle defined ‘the public’ was not static. Instead it evolved right through this period. The rise of mass popular political movements such as the Anti-Corn Law League and Chartism during the late 1830s and early 1840s meant that the Circle’s definition of the public expanded too. The attitudes and political activities of the members of the Circle relating to the public and the people also help illuminate historical discussions connecting liberalism with ideas linked to the production of public opinion. Jonathan Parry has stated liberalism in the nineteenth century was about ‘confidence in the power of discussion and reason’.33 But in order to facilitate this culture of discussion, the Circle’s members believed that people had to possess a certain capacity for intelligent thought and rational thinking. In the Circle’s view, individuals who were deemed not to possess certain standards of intelligence and understanding of the political and social issues of the day threatened to undermine the deliberative process. The Circle therefore based inclusion within the public on one’s intellectual capacity. As Alan Kahan has stated of nineteenth-century Europe generally, ‘many liberals based their arguments on intellectual capacity, on intelligence, defined not solely on talent and education, but also as a certain kind of life-experience’. According to this liberal, but undemocratic or anti-democratic view, certain types or groups of people were ‘reasonable’ and enfranchising them would ‘empower public opinion’, which helped ‘government to resist the unreasonable’.

This thesis demonstrates that a rational and intelligent public, which was led by the members of the Circle, utilised forums such as indoor town meetings and the press to formulate and give definition to public opinion in Manchester. Rather, this public believed they were able to add a sense of legitimacy and add political weight to their expressions of public opinion without

necessarily being included in the franchise. Undoubtedly, the members of the Circle wanted the franchise to be extended to middle-class people such as themselves. Yet their political activities in Manchester before the passage of the 1832 Reform Act also highlighted that a rational and middle-class public in Manchester could be formed. This public’s opinions still carried significant political weight and authority.

**Popular politics**

Studying the political activities of the members of the Circle and their understanding of the public helps to further our understanding of the ways in which extra-parliamentary politics were conducted and conceived by the middle class in early nineteenth-century Manchester. Scholars of popular politics have predominantly focused on working-class or popular radicalism and its tactics. These radical movements were able to address Parliament directly in a variety of different ways, including mass petitioning and large-scale outdoor public meetings.\(^{35}\) The importance of newspapers and public meetings, especially indoor meetings held under the aegis of local political institutions, as mechanisms for political participation and

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representation, have been obscured by this focus on radicalism and the working class in popular politics. This thesis adds a different dimension to the existing historical literature because it highlights that there was a clear and distinctive middle-class political effort in Manchester, epitomized by the Circle, that sought to effect political change through a distinctive brand of extra-parliamentary politics.

This thesis makes a further contribution to current historical debates concerning the restriction and use of public spaces for political purposes during the early nineteenth-century. Historians have paid close attention to the ways in which public opinion was stifled in the early nineteenth century by loyalist elites fearful of a potential revolutionary outbreak. After Peterloo the ‘Six Acts’ were passed which aimed to limit freedom of the press and public meetings, with the design that they would choke off post-war radicalism. Malcolm Chase has described how radicals circumvented these laws by using theatre spaces and dinners as a front for political meetings. Katrina Navickas has shown that there was a successful counter-initiative across the north of England to organise meetings in forums and spaces outside of the formal jurisdiction of local authorities, their officials and forces of law and order. In his analysis of the contested nature of public space in Bristol, Steve Poole has argued that citizenship ‘meant more than just membership of the political nation; it meant active, visible and unrestricted access to the public and civic domain, symbolically represented in social conflicts over

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37 M. Chase, Disorder and Stability in the United Kingdom (Manchester, 2013), pp. 73-6.

38 Navickas, Protest and the Politics of Space, p. 9; Navickas, Loyalism, pp. 7-19.
particularly resonant topographies and spaces’. All of which explains the premium placed on access to public space by reformers, and emphasis on the right to hold public meetings, especially when asserted against local loyalist elites.

Though the members of the Circle believed political institutions needed to be reformed, they relied on these very same political forums to articulate their political grievances. The members of the Circle thus adopted a flexible approach and attitude towards Manchester’s local political institutions. They were willing to work through them when circumstances were advantageous. Indeed, calling upon a local official such as the Boroughreeve or Churchwarden to officiate a public meeting in support of a cause such as parliamentary reform was seen by the Circle as a legitimate way for middle-class political groups to broadcast public opinion. However, the Circle’s members were also prepared to denigrate these same forums as exclusive, unrepresentative and self-selecting when local officials did not respond to their wishes.

This thesis argues that public meetings, held under the auspices of local civic institutions and public offices, provided the members of the Circle with the authority to argue that their political opinions were the legitimate embodiment of public opinion in their town. One historian who has identified the importance of the indoor public meeting is Janette Martin, who has noted that they were ‘an established feature of urban life’. She argues that the ‘properly convened and chaired indoor meeting had greater impact and authority than speeches made in the open air’. Additionally, she observed that both the speakers and the audience members in these meetings were ‘governed by shared notions of behaviour and etiquette: an important consideration in an age where political discussions could be heated and boisterous’. Martin’s

40 Martin, Popular Political Oratory, p. 76.
analysis is mainly concerned with the era of Chartism from the late 1830s onwards. This study argues that the indoor public meeting was also the central arena within which bourgeois political groups such as the members of the Circle attempted to communicate their political opinions in the late 1820s and early 1830s.

Despite the fact that various early nineteenth-century political movements, such as the numerous campaigns for parliamentary reform, against the new Poor Law and the Corn Laws, relied on the size and the strength of their popular support, the members of the Circle did not believe that mass political movements were the most effective formula to achieve political objectives. After 1832, however, things changed. The new reformed parliamentary system provided the means for a perceived rational middle class to be represented through Manchester’s two MPs. This development meant that the members of the Little Circle were not as crucial to the development and leadership of public opinion as they had been before 1832. Furthermore, the development of popular politics after 1832 showcased the effectiveness of mass organisation and campaigning, as highlighted by the Anti-Slavery movement and the Anti-Corn Law League.

The activities of the Manchester-based Anti-Corn Law League during the 1840s – which included members of the Circle – emphasised the necessity of attracting larger and broader political audiences. While the use of small indoor assemblies facilitated deliberative discussion within which the Circle’s members could articulate, lead and claim to represent the interests of the wider community, there were limits to the openness, inclusiveness and representativeness of this approach. Although these indoor public meetings were never exclusive affairs limited

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to a middle-class elite, in that they never prohibited any particular groups or people from attending, there were other practical limits to accessing these forums. The size of the room as well as the timing of these indoor public meetings ensured that a more selective audience could attend. After 1832, despite the fact that meetings remained indoors, larger venues were chosen so that they could accommodate a wider audience base.\textsuperscript{42} The changed political climate after 1832 underscored the limitations of, and challenges to, the Little Circle’s approach to popular politics. But it also helps us to understand that the Circle were adaptable, flexible and pragmatic as politicians and not dogmatic idealists.

Another way this thesis helps broaden our understanding of early nineteenth-century British popular politics centres around its examination of why political unions were ineffective in Manchester. Aside from Birmingham, which had a unique social and political situation that brought middle and working-class political groups together, most towns in this period failed to provide a potent political union.\textsuperscript{43} This included Manchester, which as Asa Briggs has described, lacked a united political union that could appeal to both middle class and working-class groups.\textsuperscript{44} The rationale of political unions was to build a consensus and sense of cooperation amongst different social and religious groups in order to support and also pressure Grey’s ministry to achieve parliamentary reform. Nancy LoPatin stated that if ‘people from urban and rural areas, Anglicans and Nonconformists, professionals and labourers, manufacturers and artisans, could somehow find common ground and co-operate, then “the people” could persuade politicians to carry parliamentary reform legislation’.\textsuperscript{45} The idea of

\textsuperscript{43} C. Flick, \textit{Birmingham Political Union and the Movements for Reform in Britain}, 1830-39 (Folkestone, 1979); N. LoPatin, \textit{Political Unions, Popular Politics and the Great Reform Act of 1832} (Basingstoke, 1999).
\textsuperscript{45} LoPatin, \textit{Political Unions}, p. 7.
political unions along the Birmingham model was to promote an image of ‘class harmony among the industrious people and suggested a process of on-going liberal reform’.\textsuperscript{46} In short, while middle-class reformers were content to endorse the Whig reform plan, working-class radicals, following the lead of Henry Hunt, pressed for universal male suffrage and other more advanced electoral reforms.

This thesis contributes to existing understandings of the uneven impact of political unions by demonstrating that the failure to establish a united political union in Manchester was about more than just class. Certainly, class divisions contributed to the formation of two rival unions, the Manchester Political Union and the Manchester Political Union of the Working Classes. It is significant that the members of the Circle were never part of either union.\textsuperscript{47} The Circle held aloof from political unions, as they preferred a different brand of middle-class extra-parliamentary activity to assert their political demands, and furthermore, had principled objections to unions as organisations. The Circle believed that political unions were institutions that compelled members to conform to a single collective view. Unity thus came at a cost of the plurality of opinions, modulated through a process of rational and deliberative discussion, which was so prized by the Circle. The members of the Circle’s philosophical critique of unions influenced the way they avoided joining political associations in the first place. However, after 1832 the Circle were forced to admit the power and effectiveness of mass political associations and organisations, in spite of these reservations.

\textsuperscript{46} Belchem, \textit{Popular Radicalism}, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{47} Contrary to Navickas, \textit{Protest and Politics}, pp. 126-27.
Party politics

The final contribution that this thesis makes is to recent debates about the formation of modern political parties in nineteenth-century Britain. By examining the activities of the Circle after 1832, this study considers how changes in the British electoral and political system were perceived and handled by individuals in one of Britain’s newly enfranchised towns. John Philips and Charles Wetherell have observed that the 1832 Reform Act ‘infused elections with a new sense of principle, and the electorate responded with a new degree of inter-election partisan loyalty, most voters following one party vote with another at successive elections’. The development of stronger partisan voting patterns was paralleled by a realignment of political partisanship at Westminster. However, the parliamentary parties of the early nineteenth century, although organised, were loose and informal coalitions, rather than the disciplined, organised political parties of the end of the nineteenth century. Angus Hawkins has observed that to speak of a two-party system in the 1830s and 1840s was shorthand for a very ‘fragile alliance of Whigs, radicals and Irish, and on the other side, Conservatives committed to a ministerial ethic, not a party doctrine’. In addition, Joseph Coohill has argued that there was a ‘coherent and recognizable Liberal party’ presence that existed in Britain before 1860. In Coohill’s estimation, Liberal MPs were a ‘self-defined and relatively disciplined group of politicians sharing a broad sense of liberal politics’.


51 Coohill, Ideas of the Liberal Party, pp. 6-8.
The new political development after 1832 was that local politics, due to the machinery of the Reform Act, was increasingly linked to parliamentary parties and national politics. Philip Salmon and Frank O’Gorman have demonstrated that the requirement to register voters annually relied upon the ‘agency of party’ to enrol and strike off voters. This, they argued, brought the national policies of Westminster into the homes of every elector. Moreover, Matthew Cragoe has shown how local Conservative Associations after 1832 embedded a ‘culture of political belonging focused on national issues’. Conservative Associations helped educate local opinion ‘and rendered it politically effective through the process of registration’, while the press helped ‘universalize the central tenets of the Conservative credo’. Liberals harnessed the use of reform associations to build up their network of support. Dinners were frequently used as a means to promote the political programme of liberal candidates.

The contribution this thesis makes to existing understandings of partisan politics surfaces through its examination of the anxieties in newly represented towns like Manchester concerning the growth of partisanship and elections. My thesis describes the difficult political transition for middle-class reformers such as the members of the Circle in Manchester before and after the 1832 Reform Act. In short, the Circle had to adapt their pre-conceived perceptions about the best way to achieve political change. Partisan political meetings, from the perspective of the Circle, could only ever represent a pre-defined public that was unrepresentative of the thoughts and opinions of their entire town. Yet these were new realities that the members of the Circle had to accept. An examination of the attitudes and activities of the Circle after 1832

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is a valuable historical exercise because it establishes that political changes in this period were not uncontested. Such a study shows that these changes elicited feelings of apprehension and misgivings amongst political figures who had previously relied on a more moderated and exclusive form of political action.

**Sources and methodology**

This thesis utilises a variety of different sources, including journals, personal papers, political pamphlets, newspaper articles and scrapbooks. Pamphlets such as John Edward Taylor’s *Notes and Observations*, which was written shortly after Peterloo, and autobiographical works such as Archibald Prentice’s *Historical Sketches*, help to build an understanding of the Circle’s political convictions. But we also have to be cautious about using sources written from the perspective of individuals such as Prentice and Taylor, who were both journalists writing for a public audience. Although Prentice’s *Sketches* offers a detailed overview of political life in Manchester between 1792 to 1832, one of the main problems associated with the work is that it was written in 1851, and it arguably exaggerates the significance of the Circle as a group. While this book offers a useful guide to the Circle and their ideas, it is not sufficient. David Craig and James Thompson have argued that it is ‘not enough to examine epistemes or discourse alone – certainly, these form a crucial background to behaviour’. Rather they assert that it is vital to ‘drill down to look at how individuals thought and behaved if we are to credit them with agency’, since everyone has ‘ideas – views, attitudes, assumptions, prejudices, whatever – which affect what they do’.\(^5\) Even if the importance of the members of the Circle were exaggerated by Prentice, his insights still offer us a unique and important glimpse into

the mind-set of a prominent middle-class reformer who was actively involved in political debates in Manchester between 1812 and 1846.

Another key source base for this thesis are Richard Potter’s personal papers, which cover the years 1778-1842, and which have been little used by historians. These papers come in a variety of forms, including letters, diary entries and newspaper cuttings. Not only do they reveal details about Potter’s youth, but they extend right into his career as MP for Wigan between 1832 and 1839. Another important source is Absalom Watkin’s diary, which was edited by Watkin’s grandson, A.E. Watkin. This diary, as well as giving details of his personal interests and religious ideas, offers the most detailed and direct analysis of what it was like to be a member of the Little Circle on a day-to-day basis.56 We can see from his account that as well as being relatively wealthy and politically active, the Circle’s members enjoyed similar bourgeois interests such as collecting art, reading, gardening, walking and attending scientific and horticultural lectures.

Because religion is a central focus of this thesis, sources such as Unitarian and Bible Christian sermons and lectures are utilised. Robert Saunders has noted that the sermon ‘remains a neglected source in the study of nineteenth-century political history’ despite the fact that it ‘constituted one of the most pervasive forms of oratory and a crucial point of contact between “high” and “low” political culture’.57 While Saunders has made a convincing assessment about the role of Anglican preachers in shaping public opinion against political reform in the nineteenth century, our understanding of the political and social impact of Nonconformist sermons in this period has not been as closely analysed. The Potter brothers, Atkinson, Baxter,

Shuttleworth, Smith and Taylor represented the Unitarian contingent of the Circle’s membership, whereas Brotherton and Harvey were Bible Christians. Prentice was a Scottish Presbyterian and Watkin was a member of the Methodist New Connection. For this reason, my thesis utilises a range of sermons emanating from Nonconformist churches and chapels. The sermons that are used in this study help us to understand how the members of the Circle’s distinctive approach to politics and social issues was influenced by their religious views and backgrounds.

Perhaps the most significant sources utilised in this thesis are newspapers. The press and its ever-changing role in shaping public opinion has been the focus of a number of important studies. Barker has stated that the press played a ‘decisive role in altering or promoting existing governmental policy’ during the early nineteenth century. Newspapers put ‘the people’ into the centre of English politics, but were also instrumental in ‘politicising and uniting sections within the increasingly powerful body of “the public”’. The two most prominent newspapers in this study are the Manchester Guardian and Manchester Times. In 1822 the Manchester Guardian sold around 1,000 copies a week, which ultimately rose to 10,000 a week by 1843. The Manchester Guardian later began to produce one issue on a Wednesday and a further issue on Saturday. Newspapers were relatively expensive commodities before the stamp duty on newspapers was reduced from 4d. to 1d. in 1836, and finally repealed in 1855. Yet this earlier expense did not deter the working class from reading them. Editions were often read by more than one person, or sold more cheaply as a second-hand edition. Additionally, copies were

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59 Read, Press and People, pp. 63-89.
made available in local libraries and societies such as the London Corresponding Society and Manchester Reformation Society. Often newspapers were also read aloud in public meetings by groups such as the Birmingham Political Union.  

The *Manchester Times* and *Manchester Guardian* might have been edited by members of the Circle and founded through the financial benefaction of several of its members; however, this thesis will not assume that its various articles and editorials reflected a definitive representation of the combined opinions of this group. In fact, these two newspapers adopted different editorial lines from one another. The *Manchester Guardian* was more moderate, while the *Manchester Times* pursued a more radical agenda. For instance, the *Manchester Times* advocated an extension of the suffrage to everyone who could read and sign their own name to a petition. The *Manchester Guardian*, on the other hand, backed the government’s proposals for a modest increase of the franchise based on a property qualification. Taylor stated that the purpose of the *Manchester Guardian* was to offer ‘morally pure’ political opinions and to ‘advance the social prosperity of his country’. Pushing forward a radical agenda that threatened to shake the foundations of the political state was never part of the *Manchester Guardian’s* vision. Rather, it was a paper that sought to build its commercial standing and return a profit, and by 1830 it was achieving a £3,000 profit for the year. This thesis utilises both these newspapers to show how public opinion in Manchester was understood and relayed. The *Manchester Guardian* appealed to a broad base of middle-class elites in Manchester, which undoubtedly influenced its commercial success. The *Manchester Times*, however, believed it

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61 *Manchester Times*, 5 October 1839

62 *Manchester Guardian*, 5 May 1821.

63 Read, *Press and People*, p. 63; *Manchester Times*, 20 November 1830.
was important to be more proactive and lead public opinion rather than pander to it. The differences expressed in these two papers, both edited by members of the Circle, will help determine how difficult it was for this band to harmonise different points of view and political opinions in their town.

Newspapers reported on the intelligence and public business transacted in their locality, including meetings. Although public meetings could only ever incorporate a small section of the population in Manchester, newspapers helped widen the scope of the public sphere through reprinting the proceedings, and relaying them to a larger audience. People thus engaged with the reports of public meetings and became more educated and informed about the political issues of their town. By focusing on the reports of public meetings in newspapers, this thesis will attempt to say something different about the role and significance of the press in the early nineteenth century. Naturally, the press helped broadcast its own opinions through editorials. But this thesis argues that the real catalyst for the development for public opinion in Manchester was the use of indoor deliberative assemblies. The press thus effectively became a vehicle through which the reports of these meetings were articulated and disseminated to a larger audience, rather than the primary site of opinion formation.

**Structure**

This thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter examines the social, religious and commercial backgrounds of the members of the Circle. This chapter shows that the members of the Circle shared similar bourgeois, religious and educational backgrounds. It also lays the foundation for the later analysis of the members of the Circle, and argues that the group was united by a mutual understanding of self-improvement and rational political discussion.

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Importantly, this chapter will explain that their religious Nonconformity made the members of the Circle identify themselves as political outsiders in Manchester, despite their wealth. At the same time, however, their religious backgrounds informed their political and social outlooks. A commitment to helping others, scientific and rational discussions, as well as taking a lead in helping to improve the world they saw around them, anchored the collective religious understandings of the Circle’s membership and drove their political activities.

The second chapter of this study focuses on the key ideas of the members of the Circle. These ideas are split into four sections. Firstly, this chapter is separated into two sections that examine how the Circle understood the distinction between the ‘people’ and their idea of the ‘public’. Next, it explores how they understood the notion of being a ‘reformer’. This chapter then scrutinises the Circle’s concept of reform and how it linked to their interpretation of the purpose of education. Tying these sections together was the understanding that the community could cohere and form a rational and intelligent public. The people who formed this public were expected to form their own well-thought-out opinions that worked for the best of the community as a whole. According to the Circle’s reading of events, people who failed to understand the legal and political framework in which they existed played into the hands of the political authorities and lacked the capacity for the franchise.

The third chapter of this study examines the political activities of the members of the Circle between 1812 and 1832. This chapter argues that the members of the Circle initially adopted the use of indoor public meetings to shape and formulate their own bourgeois and self-styled rational and deliberative expression of public opinion. These forums were seen as the legitimate locus of middle-class and rational public thought in Manchester, while the opponents of the Circle preferred to utilise public meetings that were organised in small rooms attended by an
invited audience. The membership of the Circle referred to these latter meetings as ‘hole and corner’ assemblies. Other political groups such as working-class radicals in Manchester preferred to use mass popular tactics such as the outdoor platform to voice their political opinions. This thesis explains that members of the Circle prized the idea of deliberative political discussion. Indoor public meetings were regarded as non-partisan political forums within which a spectrum of individuals holding different political ideas and opinions could come together and form a mutual understanding of what course of political action they should follow. But in practice such meetings were only attended by like-minded people who already shared similar ideas with one another, so that very little meaningful political discussion actually took place.

As the fourth chapter will show, the members of the Circle disdained mass popular tactics as they believed they were a poor vehicle for rational and deliberative discussion and action. However, on certain occasions they resorted to using tactics such as the mass platform, as well as provocative suggestions that their town would halt paying taxes if demands were not met. Tellingly, such tactics were used only during the ‘days of May’ in 1832 after the passage of the Reform Bill was blocked by the House of Lords and were not repeated, highlighting that they were adopted as a last resort by the Circle. The changed political landscape after 1832 presented challenges for the Circle and their approach to politics. Politics after 1832 became more partisan and organised along national political alignments. Additionally, Manchester now had two MPs, whilst the £10 householder franchise included much of the middle class present in the town. These changes forced the members of the Circle to abandon the indoor public assembly. Instead, middle-class public opinion reverted to ticketed public meetings and dinners, and parliamentary representation through their MPs. In such forums, the Circle could guarantee that their proceedings could avoid the intrusion of organised political opponents who
harboured different opinions from their own. Yet this chapter will also show that the members of the Circle and their liberal allies in Manchester also began to harness more popular political tactics. Grand public meetings incorporating larger sections of the population of Manchester were increasingly the dominant mode of political activity in the late 1830s and 1840s. The meetings of the Anti-Corn Law League were able to attract mass audiences, and also differed from the Circle’s style of meetings. By inviting working-class audiences to set piece events such as bazaars and soirees, the League could guarantee that their messages could be heard and not argued against.

Together these chapters fit together to help demonstrate that the members of the Circle adopted a different kind of middle-class political leadership in early nineteenth-century Manchester. The core idea of the Circle was that public opinion had to reflect the intelligent and rational segments of their community. Of course, their ideas about who were and what was intelligent and rational were automatically coloured and shaped by their own opinions. In addition, the use of the indoor public meeting was a unique characteristic that defined how early nineteenth-century middle-class public opinion was generated. Nevertheless, it is one which has received little historical attention thus far.
Chapter 1: Who were the members of the Little Circle?

In the contested political life of early nineteenth-century Manchester, the members of the Little Circle were distinguished by their strong belief that they alone were fit to act as guardians of the interests of the town’s inhabitants. The members of the Circle were a cohort of like-minded and prominent political figures in Manchester with similar religious, social and political backgrounds. This group of eleven men adopted a distinctly middle-class approach and attitude towards politics which was characterised by the way it placed a premium on deliberation and rational discussion. This chapter explains how the Little Circle’s dedication to deliberative politics was influenced by a range of factors that included their religious beliefs, their educational backgrounds, their interest in science and philosophy, as well as their reaction to the dramatic events of Peterloo in 1819.

To be a member of the Little Circle meant to believe in a rational attempt to improve one’s own political and social situation and that of others. Although the fruits of their labours might not have been particularly evident in the midst of the reform debates of the 1820s and 1830s, the Circle clearly made a visible political mark in Manchester as a result of their deliberative style of political action. Michael Turner has underscored the way that the Circle’s activities influenced future political enterprises such as Chartism, the Manchester School and the Anti-Corn Law League.1 Whilst some early nineteenth-century political movements – including Chartism and the Anti-Corn Law League – relished mass political involvement, the members of the Circle believed that a small and elite group, such as themselves, was the correct body to speak out on behalf of the politically unrepresented and oppressed in their town. Although the

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Little Circle were united by their reforming principles, they were not popular radicals who believed in the use of mass popular action and political agitation. Rather, they believed that the best way to represent their community was to harness Manchester’s various legitimate political institutions in addition to mobilising literary sources such as the newspaper press to promote moderate reform.

This chapter utilises a variety of different sources, including journals, personal papers, political pamphlets, newspaper articles and scrapbooks. Pamphlets such as John Edward Taylor’s *Notes and Observations* (1820) offer an unshakeable criticism of the conduct and response of the cavalry deemed to be responsible for the events of Peterloo (1819). This work was written in response to a pamphlet written by Francis Philips who had praised the way the authorities in Manchester acted on 16 August 1819. More historical works such as Archibald Prentice’s *Historical Sketches* offer a very rich and detailed picture of Manchester politics. Prentice’s *Sketches*, which was written in 1851, provides a retrospective overview of political life in Manchester between 1792 to 1832. Although this work was written almost two decades after the passage of the Reform Act, it is instructive to our understanding of how one of the members of the Circle perceived the political situation in Manchester during the earlier period. Despite the fact that this work was written retrospectively, Prentice’s history is useful because it offers a rare glimpse into how the eleven members of the Circle worked together and how he personally viewed their role in Manchester’s various political struggles.

Diaries and personal scrapbooks are also utilised in this study in order to build up a portrait of the identity of the members of the Little Circle. While diaries gave the space and opportunity

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for people to construct and refine their identity in both public and private spheres, historians have shown that they were not spaces where someone could offer up a frank and honest analysis of their thoughts and feelings. Instead such works were constantly edited and refined with an eye to it being read by a potential future reader, as well as being highly subjective and performative. Sources such as Richard Potter’s personal papers also cover a sizeable time period, namely 1778-1842. These papers come in a variety of forms, which include letters, diary entries and newspaper cuttings. In addition to the use of personal papers, this chapter will draw upon a range of sermons emanating from the types of Nonconformist churches attended by members of the Circle. This chapter will argue that such sermons helped to convince the Circle’s members to make a meaningful public and political impact in Manchester and in its neighbouring towns. The sermons examined in this chapter also reveal why members of the Circle challenged themselves to adopt a rational and deliberative attempt to tackle political and social issues.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first three sections examine the factors that shaped the political ideas and tactics of the members of the Little Circle, particularly after 1819 and the events of Peterloo when the group became more visible in Manchester politics. The first section of this chapter will discuss the religious backgrounds of the Circle members. It will argue that one of the principal reasons why the Circle became so politically significant during the 1820s, 1830s and 1840s was because its members were Nonconformists. Manchester had historically been controlled by local Tory Anglican elites who administered its various

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political institutions. The members of the Circle wanted to break down the dominance of this Anglican and Tory elite, so that religious sects such as their own were more fairly represented. Moreover, the specific religious beliefs of the Nonconformist groups to which members of the Circle belonged helped to foster a sense of public duty and an obligation for public action.

The second section of this chapter will analyse the social position of the members of the Circle, and in particular their educational and occupational backgrounds. Though the members of the Circle all appear to have been inculcated with a strong work ethic, it is less clear what brought a group of cotton manufacturers, journalists and a lawyer together as an extra-parliamentary political group. This section argues that the members of the Circle were united by their understanding that political change could only be wrought through rational and deliberative debate. The third section of this chapter will analyse how the members of the Circle spent their leisure time. Pursuits such as walking, gardening, reading and art were amongst some of the most notable pastimes enjoyed by its members. In one respect, the leisure pursuits of the members of the Circle were instrumental in helping construct their middle-class public identity. But equally this chapter shows that the way in which the members of the Circle conducted themselves outside of politics was as important as their time inside of it. They believed public opinion had to be formed by people who harboured high moral values and a rational mind. One’s choice of improving leisure pursuits could reinforce the notion that an individual was part of a reasoning bourgeois public who had the capacity to engage with political ideas and issues.

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The final section of this chapter will trace how the memory of the events of Peterloo shaped the public identity of the members of the Circle. Although this section will argue that the members of the Circle sympathised with those that were hurt and killed, and eulogized the memory of the events of 16 August 1819, they also used it to identify themselves with a different brand of extra-parliamentary political activity. After Peterloo, the members of the Circle harnessed a more distinctive rational and deliberative style of politics that stood apart from other political reformers of this time. Peterloo was a critical turning point, and one that convinced the Circle’s members to adopt a new style of political action that was defined by its attempts to utilise legitimate local political forums and indoor deliberative assemblies. Together, these three sections underscore the idea that the members of the Circle were brought together as a political group in Manchester through their mutual understanding of the tolerance of conflicting opinions, their shared appreciation for self-improvement, and the way in which they placed a premium on rational and deliberative study and debate.

**The social background of the members of the Circle**

The members of the Circle formed part of a growing middle-class population in Manchester. In general, this group were united by their shared social and occupational backgrounds. Most of the Circle’s members were connected to the cotton industry in Manchester. Martin Hewitt has observed that by 1820 ‘it was clear that Manchester was beginning to supplant London as the commercial centre of the cotton goods trade’. Like so many other young men in the early nineteenth century, most members of the Circle migrated to Manchester in order to take advantage of this burgeoning industry. Richard and Thomas Potter’s father, John, had been a shopkeeper and farmer in Tadcaster, a village in North Yorkshire. John Potter taught his sons the fundamentals of business, before both Richard and Thomas migrated to Manchester in their

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early twenties, where they joined their elder brother William’s textile firm.⑥ William would eventually leave the firm in 1806, thus allowing Richard and Thomas to take full control of the business. The Potter brother’s factory, which was located on Cannon Street, gradually became one of the most prominent firms in Manchester. Brotherton and his brother-in-law, William Harvey, also operated a successful cotton business, which was located in Salford. While Harvey and Brotherton were both very successful businessmen, they were also said to have gained reputations as benevolent and caring factory owners who looked after their workers and their families.⑦ Brotherton’s early commercial success in Salford allowed him to retire in 1819 at the relatively young age of thirty six.⑧

Despite his precarious start, when he faced bankruptcy and the prospect of prison, Absalom Watkin also became a successful cotton merchant.⑨ Watkin commented that his leisure activities ‘must be subordinate to my business, to which I purpose to attend regularly and diligently during the usual hours’.⑩ Other moderately successful businessmen in the Circle included John Edward Taylor and John Shuttleworth. After working for a period as an apprentice in the factory of Benjamin Oakden, Taylor commenced a partnership with his friend Shuttleworth. After Taylor left this partnership in order to embark on a career in journalism, Shuttleworth took full control of the firm. Prentice recalled how ‘Shuttleworth and Taylor could sell their cotton to men who could not buy it cheaper elsewhere’, whereas ‘Thomas and Richard Potter could sell their fustians, Brotherton and Harvey their yarns’.⑪ Richard and

⑥ Richard Potter Collection, London School of Economics - COLL MISC 0146, Volume 1, pp. 1-2, 56-105.
Thomas Potter’s firm became the most reputable textile manufacturer in Manchester, and included both a domestic and foreign market base.\textsuperscript{12} Seven members of the Little Circle were amongst the initial members of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce: a body which was established to represent the interests of the local business community.\textsuperscript{13} The Potter brothers, Shuttleworth, Taylor, Smith, Baxter and Prentice used the platform of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce to listen to, and speak up on, important economic issues such as mortgages, the reduction of stamp duties, tenant duties and low import duties.\textsuperscript{14}

While their factories had allowed the majority of the members of the Circle the opportunity to build their fortunes, other members of the group chose careers that they believed could help safeguard and educate others. In his teens Atkinson decided to pursue a career in the law, and eventually he would qualify as a lawyer in 1810. By 1817 Atkinson was in charge of his own legal firm, Atkinson, Saunders and Co.\textsuperscript{15} Prentice described Atkinson as ‘an able lawyer and a thorough hater of oppression, whose legal knowledge and earnest love of liberty were soon to be effectively used on behalf of the illegally oppressed’.\textsuperscript{16} After the events of Peterloo, Atkinson was requested by Henry Hunt to represent him; however, he was ultimately prevented from doing so by the magistrates in Manchester.\textsuperscript{17} The most significant trial Atkinson appeared in was the trial of the ‘thirty eight’ in 1819. This trial involved thirty eight men, including the radical protestor John Knight, who were accused of attending a seditious meeting and swearing illegal oaths.\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{13} A. Walters, ‘The Beginnings of the Manchester Chamber’,\textit{Manchester Chamber of Commerce Monthly Record} 32 (1921).
\bibitem{14} \textit{Manchester Chamber of Commerce Annual Reports}, Manchester Archives+, GB127. M8 1820, 1821, 1822, 1826.
\bibitem{15} \textit{Manchester Times}, 12 July 1859.
\bibitem{16} Prentice, \textit{Sketches}, p. 74.
\bibitem{17} Henry Hunt to Atkinson Correspondence, Manchester Archives +, BR.942. 73071.
\bibitem{18} \textit{Cowdroy’s Gazette}, 9 October 1819.
\end{thebibliography}
Two other prominent members of the Circle, Taylor and Prentice, were journalists and editors of the *Manchester Guardian* and *Manchester Times* respectively. Archibald Prentice migrated from Glasgow to Manchester, where he worked as an apprentice in a muslin warehouse. In 1811 Prentice’s master decided to send him travelling around Britain ‘to receive orders for the muslins’ that were manufactured in his warehouse. Eventually, Prentice settled in Manchester where he said he found ‘more country drapers than I could, with the utmost industry, meet in their own shops’. During his time in Manchester Prentice began to write articles for a local newspaper, *Cowdroy’s Gazette*. Before he left his partnership with Shuttleworth, Taylor similarly began writing for *Cowdroy’s Gazette*. With the financial assistance of Thomas and Richard Potter, Taylor was appointed editor of a new local newspaper, the *Manchester Guardian*, which was established in 1821. Prentice suggested that Taylor was chosen because he was ‘the only person of our number whose time was not fully occupied by the management of extensive mercantile or manufacturing concerns’.

Seven years later, and once again through the financial assistance of the Potter brothers, Prentice was made editor of the *Manchester Times*. Initially, Watkin had been considered for the role. Nevertheless, Potter stated that ‘it would be a terrible thing if somebody got hold of it that was not decided in his opinions, and...you would not be decided enough’. Reflecting on the way he had been overlooked for this role, Watkin responded that ‘by decided, they mean decidedly of their opinion’. Watkin had asked for complete ‘liberty’ when editing this paper:

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demand that Potter was not prepared to tolerate.\textsuperscript{23} In Potter’s mind, it was desirable to produce a clear and unequivocal expression of public opinion that correlated with his own ideas.

Taylor and Prentice’s roles as editors of two prominent local newspapers put them at the centre of the weekly – and, from 1836, bi-weekly – dissemination of middle-class public opinion in their town. By 1826 the \textit{Manchester Guardian} was producing 2,372 copies a week, and by 1835 it was producing over 4,300.\textsuperscript{24} Figure 1.1 demonstrates an annual circulation and weekly circulation of newspapers in Manchester in the final three months of 1835 and the first three months of 1836.

\textbf{Figure 1.1}

\textbf{Table Showing Weekly and Annual Circulation of Local Newspapers in Manchester in 1836.}

\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Newspaper} & \textbf{Weekly Circulation} & \textbf{Annual Circulation} \\
\hline
\textit{Manchester Guardian} & 4315 & 192500 \\
\textit{Manchester Times} & 2125 & 93500 \\
\textit{Manchester Advertiser} & 1818 & 80000 \\
\textit{Manchester Chronicle} & 500 & 2200 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

Source: \textit{Manchester Guardian}, 11 June 1836. Annual Circulation is calculated by multiplying weekly circulation by 44 in accordance with the available information regarding record of sales.

According to its own record of sales, based on the information they received over a 44 week time period, the \textit{Manchester Guardian} dominated the newspaper market in Manchester. It is reasonable to suggest that its editorial stance and opinions reflected a broad swathe of

\textsuperscript{23} Watkin, \textit{Diary}, p. 122.
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Manchester Guardian}, 11 June 1836.
contemporary middle-class opinion in Manchester. The paper also contained many more advertisements than its rivals, which also supports the assertion of its dominance in the town and its strong relationship with a middle-class readership. Unlike Prentice, who declared that he wanted to lead public opinion at the *Manchester Times*, Taylor’s *Manchester Guardian* appears to have been linked more closely to narrower bourgeois and commercial interests in Manchester. Whereas the *Manchester Guardian* had over 11,000 advertisements between the January and June of 1837, the *Manchester Times* had as few as 2,339. The next closest paper in terms of advertisements was the *Manchester Courier*, which contained around 4,000.

Embarking on a career in journalism was not a risk-free enterprise. Members of the Circle would have recalled that there was a high attrition rate of newspapers in Manchester. In 1795 the *Manchester Herald* folded due to a constant battle with the local authorities who attempted to prosecute its editors, Thomas Walker and Thomas Cooper. Ultimately, the *Manchester Herald* ceased publication under this pressure from the local Tory elite. Leaving a relatively financially secure job in a factory for journalism did not guarantee much future financial reward. Prentice made a meagre wage for the rest of his life. After Prentice spent time in America in the 1840s, he was forced to take on a role in Manchester’s gas office, where he received an annual salary of £150. Prentice was also fortunate enough to receive an annuity of £100 from friends and admirers as well as a stipend from the Anti-Corn Law League for the services he afforded them.

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26 Joseph Brotherton Scrapbook, Salford Local History Library, Manuscript Collection, Volume 6, p. 17.
28 Ziegler, ‘Prentice, Archibald (1792–1857)’.
It seems likely that financial reward was not the driving force behind Prentice’s desire to work for a newspaper. Both Taylor and Prentice switched careers and moved into newspaper journalism because they sensed that there was a growing post-war need and appetite for political information.\textsuperscript{29} It was Taylor, Prentice and the other members of the Circle’s belief that opinion in their town ‘might be more easily effected by calm but spirited discussion than by violent denunciations proceeding from great assemblages’. They sensed that there was a clear ‘want for an efficient press’.\textsuperscript{30} Writing in his \textit{Sketches}, Prentice stated that the \textit{Manchester Times} ‘waited not for the favourable tide of public opinion, but strove to create it’.\textsuperscript{31} Unlike the majority of the Circle’s members, Taylor and Prentice dedicated themselves to a career that allowed them to perform a public service as their main occupation. Although most of the members of the Circle were wealthy and well-established figures in the business community in Manchester, the most important aspect of their identity as a political group was borne out of their sense of public service. In the next section, I explain that this collective sense of public duty was influenced profoundly by their religious backgrounds.

**The religious backgrounds of the members of the Circle**

Religion was a central unifying factor for the members of the Circle, which brought them together both intellectually and morally. All of the members of the Circle had a Nonconformist religious background. Yet their religious Nonconformity has arguably been underplayed by historians.\textsuperscript{32} This section explains that the religious beliefs of the members of the Circle influenced their understanding of rational and deliberative political action. I explain that their

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, pp. 333-4.
individual religious beliefs helped guide their understanding of what role they should play in society. From their perspective, the Circle’s members believed that they had a special duty to shape and articulate public opinion. They also recognised that they had an obligation to teach and guide people who did not fully grasp their political and social interests. A key aspect of the Circle’s Nonconformist backgrounds was the idea they had a duty to serve the people of Manchester and to represent their interests. With this in mind, members of the Circle resolved to make themselves into visible political figures in their town. Whether representing the interests of their fellow townspeople in local meetings, or standing for political office, this section illustrates that the Circle’s sense of public duty was influenced through their religious beliefs. The members of the Circle had various Nonconformist religious backgrounds, although the majority of them were Unitarian. Seven out of the eleven members of the Circle were Unitarians. Of the other members of the Circle, Joseph Brotherton and William Harvey were Bible Christian, Absalom Watkin was a member of the Methodist New Connection and Archibald Prentice was a Scottish Presbyterian. As most of the Circle were Unitarian, it was Unitarianism which had most influence on the political activities of the Little Circle. Though the sects to which the members of the Circle adhered were theologically diverse, the common themes in the religious beliefs of the members of the Circle bound them together and taught them the importance of rational thinking.

Whilst the Unitarians John Edward Taylor, J.B. Smith, Fenton Atkinson, John Shuttleworth, Thomas and Richard Potter attended the Cross Street Chapel in Manchester, Edward Baxter worshipped at the neighbouring Mosley Street Chapel. There were some differences in the theology and approach of the two chapels, though historians have described how most Unitarian churches in Britain in the nineteenth-century were Biblicist: namely, those people
who studied the Bible extensively and interpreted it both literally and critically.\textsuperscript{33} Manchester Unitarians, most notably at the Cross Street Chapel, did not pay much attention to doctrine, and encouraged their followers to apply their own interpretations to the Bible. Cross Street Unitarians were distinct from those who attended the Mosley Street Chapel, whose followers originally left the Cross Street Chapel because it lacked a strict religious doctrine. Yet ultimately, Mosley Street Unitarians chose to read from the same printed prayer books as those at Cross Street.\textsuperscript{34} As has been noted, the Cross Street Unitarians did not interpret the Bible literally, but instead encouraged its congregation to adopt their own independent ideas. Writing in 1884, in his history of the Cross Street Chapel, Thomas Baker noted that there was a ‘futility of all attempts to produce uniformity of belief.’ Baker added that there ‘will be minds…which will acknowledge no doctrines or forms but such as their individual judgement approves.’\textsuperscript{35} Unitarians such as the Circle were taught to question the world around them. This desire to look beyond the surface helped define the Circle as a rational and deliberative political group.

Prentice was the only member of the Circle who was Presbyterian. However, in common with Unitarians, he too revered the ‘tolerant spirit of Christianity’.\textsuperscript{36} This understanding of religious toleration was also shared by Absalom Watkin who belonged to the Methodist New Connection. This brand of Methodism wanted a complete separation from the Church of England and a more democratic form of religious convention. Members of the Methodist New Connection found the Methodist Annual Conference too close-minded in its attitudes and traditions. Additionally, members of the Methodist New Connection, such as Watkin, made a

\textsuperscript{34} Turner, Reform and Respectability, pp. 34-5.
\textsuperscript{36} Cowdroy’s Gazette, 19 March 1825.
clear and concerted effort to broaden the scope of their intellectual and religious horizons. Much like the Cross Street Unitarian members of the Circle, Watkin did not feel himself bound by a strict religious doctrine, but instead preferred to engage with different ideas that emanated from religious sects that were at variance with his own. Watkin noted that one of his ambitions was ‘to hear the best preachers of all denominations’. For instance, Watkin noted how he would frequently listen to various sermons from groups, including Anglican, Catholic, Bible Christian and Unitarian ceremonies.\(^{37}\) On 14 August 1819 Watkin recalled how he went to the Cross Street Chapel to hear Reverend John Robberds speak about how to observe the worship of God. Watkin noted that Robberds emphasised that it was important to have ‘Preparation – Attention – Recollection’ when worshipping. On another occasion, Watkin listened to a Cross Street sermon entitled ‘Prove all things’. He also attended other services such as Catholic Mass, and while he said he was ‘pleased with their chanting of the Latin service’, he also noted it produced a ‘powerful effect, especially on the ignorant’.\(^{38}\) For Watkin, the worship of God involved engaging with uncovering certain truths about the universe, rather than a sense of mysticism and blind faith.\(^{39}\)

Freedom of inquiry was also an important virtue for Bible Christians such as Joseph Brotherton and William Harvey. Both Harvey and Brotherton attended the services of the Reverend James Scholefield, who spoke to his congregation in Salford. Scholefield followed the teachings of William Cowherd, who educated his followers of the importance of the freedom of mind, as well as other moral obligations such as teetotalism and vegetarianism.\(^{40}\) Scholefield stated that

\(^{37}\) Watkin, \textit{Diary}, pp. 12, 38,

\(^{38}\) Ibid, pp. 19, 55, 59.

\(^{39}\) Ibid, p. 116.

his congregation did not have any ‘attachment to any sect in particular’, and that he and ‘his flock conform ourselves to the scriptures, and act according to them’. While the Cross Street Unitarians of the Circle on the other hand did not pay as close attention to the Bible, Brotherton and Harvey were taught that the Bible was the most important book ‘ever written’. No other book ‘flew so full in the face of oppression and pleaded for justice, mercy, and truth, so boldly repeated, as the Bible’. Bible Christians such as Brotherton and Harvey read the Bible closely, but they also looked to rationalise inconsistencies and find some scientific explanation for the events and miracles of which it spoke. Scholefield stated that his followers could not ‘believe what we can not rationally understand’. Furthermore, he stated in one of his sermons that religion was about ‘the exercise of reason in the vigorous mind’. Events such as the Great Flood or the story of the creation of the Earth were harmonised with scientific facts. For Bible Christians, although the Bible was an important text and clearly was seen as a source of morals and virtues, it was also a source that required a rational and scientific evaluation. By explaining certain miracles through science, Bible Christians were able to understand the workings of God and the universe in a way that made sense to them. In this we see a clear theological link to Manchester Unitarianism.

Bible Christians such as Brotherton and Harvey also placed a high premium on understanding the complexities behind certain words or ideas. In his commonplace book, Brotherton compiled and defined words and ideas in ways that made sense to him. Brotherton researched and gave brief definitions to words ranging from ‘pharaoh’ and ‘swan’ to ‘religion’: which he defined

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41 J. Scholefield, Remarks on the Sermon, Adopted to the State of the Times, Preached by the Rev. James Scholefield in the Methodist Church, Oldham Street, Manchester (Manchester, 1819), p. 23.
44 Scholefield, Remarks, p. 23.
as the ‘Science of making man happy’. For Brotherton, religion was underpinned by a practical desire to make improvements to the world. Christianity, from Brotherton’s perspective, was not an aggregate of different religious doctrines and teachings. The fact that religion was defined as a ‘science’ by Brotherton also emphasised that he believed results were the most integral aspect of his understanding of Christianity. From his perspective religion was about attempting to make others happy and trying to make the world around him a much better and more harmonious place.

Unitarians of both the Mosley Street and Cross Street Chapel believed it was important to use their intelligence to tackle and solve the political and social issues that confronted them. John Seed has noted how Unitarianism was an ‘important bearer of the radical intellectualism of the Enlightenment with its emphasis on useful and practical knowledge and its links to scientific discourses’. Diffusing useful and practical ideas was an essential tenet of Manchester Unitarianism in this period. Speaking at the Mosley Street Chapel, Reverend Tayler declared that it was the duty of his congregation to ‘speak the honest truth to their humbler brethren and to teach them as rational and moral beings.’ Manchester’s Unitarians recognised that they were in a privileged positon to lead and teach others. For example, the preacher at the Unitarian Cross Street Chapel, Reverend J. Robberds, remarked at a memorial for John Edward Taylor, which was held in 1844, that:

If a man, by his position, ability, employment, or any other cause, is enabled to command the attention of many minds – if he has the power of diffusing through a wide circle whatever statements and representations he makes on a variety of subjects, then, for every mind thus placed within his reach, it is of exceeding consequence that he should deeply feel his responsibility for the impression which he conveys – that he should seriously think of both the good and evil which he may put into circulation – and that he should hold himself sacredly and religiously bound to the exercise of the greatest care, lest he be instrumental in sanctions and

46 J. Brotherton Commonplace Book, Salford Local History Library, Manuscript Collection, Volume 2, p. 62
48 J. Tayler The Moral Education of the People 1 December 1833 (Manchester, 1833) p. 12
disseminating falsehoods, in strengthening error, in fostering prejudice, on exciting bad feelings, and thus adding to the hindrances of human improvement and happiness.\textsuperscript{49}

Unitarians who attended the Cross Street Chapel believed they had a religious responsibility and duty to go out into the world and diffuse their influence to effect important social and political changes. Robberds’ words highlight that it was important for his congregation to be able to make a rational and reasoned contribution to society, and that it was vital to weigh up the potential impact of their future actions. Prudence and caution were important aspects of Manchester Unitarianism and, as we shall see in the course of this study, the Little Circle were careful and calculated political operatives, who assessed the legitimacy and potential risks and benefits of following one course of political action.

One of the most direct ways the members of the Circle believed they could influence the world around them, and help nurture a more contented society, was to take a prominent role in the political life of their town. Seed notes that Unitarians in Manchester were the ‘leading middle-class grouping’, who were integral to the development of a ‘liberal culture’\textsuperscript{50}. The idea that Cross Street Chapel Unitarians should make positive steps towards making themselves into public figures in their town was evinced in another sermon delivered by Reverend Robberds. In this sermon, Robberds stated that his congregation should make ‘beneficial changes in society’ and think of it as a ‘kind of impiety’ not to.\textsuperscript{51} Moreover, in a later sermon delivered in 1839, Robberds declared that ‘Churches are…associations of men for purposes…in relation to their own faith and worship’.\textsuperscript{52} Cross Street Chapel Unitarians were taught that they had a

\textsuperscript{49}J. Robberds, \textit{The Importance of Conscientiousness in the Use of Influence: a Sermon / preached in Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, Sunday, January 14, 1844 on the Occasion of the Death of Mr. John Edward Taylor} (London, 1844), pp. 5-6
\textsuperscript{50}J. Seed, ‘Unitarianism, Political Economy and the Antimonies of Liberal Culture in Manchester, 1830-50’, \textit{Social History} 7 (1982), 1-25, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{51}J.G. Robberds, \textit{Here for Men of Duty of Piety to God} in \textit{Christian Festivals and National Seasons} (Manchester, 1839), p. 3
\textsuperscript{52}J.G. Robberds, \textit{The Duty of a Christian Church in Relation to the World: A Sermon} (Manchester, 1839), p. 5.
special duty to make a difference to the world around them. They were encouraged to be leaders and to use their influence to make a positive difference to society more generally.

Aside from being instrumental in numerous social and political campaigns, such as those for the abolition of slavery, Catholic emancipation, the repeal of the Corn Laws, municipal reform and parliamentary reform, many Unitarians in Manchester were elected or appointed to various public offices. Notably, Richard Potter was elected MP for Wigan (1832-1839), while J.B. Smith became MP for Stirling (1847-1852), Thomas Potter became the first Mayor of Manchester in 1838, and John Shuttleworth performed the role of deputy Mayor. Other notable Manchester Unitarians to be appointed to a public office, included James Heywood who became MP for North Lancashire (1847-1857), Mark Philips, who became the first MP for Manchester (1832-1847) and George Wood, who became MP for South Lancashire (1832-1835). Another member of the Circle, the Bible Christian, Joseph Brotherton, was elected to become Salford’s first MP (1832-1857).

Though Nonconformity was often linked to exclusion from public life, particularly in the eighteenth century, being a Unitarian in Manchester in the early nineteenth century could open up many opportunities and advantages to aspiring young men who harboured strong political ambitions. Turner has observed that the Unitarian Cross Street Chapel was a ‘launching-pad for a public career’.\(^{53}\) The Unitarian congregations in Manchester, which were located on Cross Street and Mosley Street, were very affluent and offered many important political, financial and commercial connections. An analysis of the birth registry at both chapels reveals that the bulk of each congregation was composed of artisans, shopkeepers, factory owners and merchants. As members of these Unitarian congregations, aspiring young men such as the

\(^{53}\) Turner, *Reform and Respectability*, p. 36.
members of the Circle could make important commercial connections.\textsuperscript{54} It was only through the financial assistance from the members of the Cross Street Chapel that the \textit{Manchester Guardian} was founded. There was also opportunity to build family connections in these two chapels. As a member of the Cross Street Chapel, Thomas Potter was able to gain an introduction to his future wife, who was the second daughter of Thomas Bayley – a respectable and wealthy agriculturist and philanthropist.

Unitarianism might have appealed to some members of the Circle because it appeared more permissive towards personal wealth than other sects such as Methodism. The Cross Street Chapel was a finely furnished building. As well as possessing an oak pulpit, which a neighbouring Anglican Church called St Stephen’s initially ordered but later could not afford, it contained a massive gallery, pews of solid oak and mosaics decorating the walls.\textsuperscript{55} But the Unitarian members of the Circle also valued the idea that they should utilise their wealth to ameliorate the conditions of the world around them, and to help those less fortunate than themselves. Richard Potter in particular said that it was his purpose to make as much money as possible, with the intention that he would utilise his wealth to help others.\textsuperscript{56} Potter clearly did not believe that one’s religious understanding and appreciation for doctrine were the key aspects of Christianity. Rather the way one operated in the world and sought out opportunities to help those in need through charitable works, reflected his idea of what it meant to be a Christian.

\textsuperscript{55} Baker, \textit{Memorials of a Dissenting Chapel}, p. 56.
\textsuperscript{56} Richard Potter Collection, Volume 1, p. 12.
As a Bible Christian, Joseph Brotherton similarly recognised that it was important to be charitable and philanthropic. In his common place book, he noted that charity ‘consists in giving what is necessary for the body’ whereas a second form, known as ‘spiritual charity’ provided ‘ideas or food for the mind’. Brotherton was a devoted public servant who was renowned for being both a generous philanthropist, a committed MP and benevolent factory owner. When he suddenly died in 1858, while in the company of Thomas Potter during a journey in an omnibus, a meeting was quickly organised by the mayor of Salford, Stephen Heelis, to raise money for the construction of a statue. During his memorial service, the Bishop of Manchester commented that the people of Manchester and Salford were ‘grateful for those extraordinary gifts of humility, devotion to the public service, and unselfish sense of rectitude…to have governed his course through life’. Bible Christians such as Joseph Brotherton were reminded of the value of contributing to society and offering a helping hand to others if they saw injustice and corruption. Indeed, the Reverend Scholefield stated that when ‘a government is incredibly bad, cursed are the hands that hold it up, and blessed are the hands that pull it down’. Although Paul Pickering and Alex Tyrrell have noted that Brotherton and Harvey were far less radical than Scholefield, who became an ardent supporter of universal suffrage and the Chartists in the 1840s, they were men who dedicated their life to improvement and political change. This sense of public duty was borne out of their religious conviction and desire to have an active role in society.

Education was another way members of the Circle sought to perform an active public role in their community, and this too was linked to their religious beliefs. Unitarians dedicated a

57 Brotherton, Common Place Book, p. 31.
58 Brotherton Memorial Inauguration of the Statue of the Late Joseph Brotherton Esq MP in Peel Park Salford, on Thursday, August 5, 1858 (1858), p. 7.
59 Scholefield, Remarks, p. 16.
significant amount of their time and energy into joining and founding various educational institutions that catered for the middle class in Manchester. The Reverend Thomas Baker, writing in 1884, stated that ‘within and around it repose of the ashes of the early Nonconforming confessors’ there were ‘men who fought in the foremost ranks of civil and religious liberty’ who were prepared to ‘resist oppression, to encourage liberal institutions, to advance the progress of knowledge and to exalt the dignity of human nature’. The members of the Circle believed that education had the power to improve the conduct and productivity of the masses. Several members of the Circle, including Watkin, Shuttleworth, Baxter and Prentice, joined the Literary and Philosophical Society: an institution that encouraged curious-minded men in Manchester to meet and listen to various lectures and presentations. Watkin recalled how he attended lectures on topics such as the ways to measure rainfall, to the geology of the country between Manchester and Loughborough. The Athenaeum was also founded in Manchester with the help of Richard and Thomas Potter in 1835. Members would pay a subscription of 30 shillings a year, which enabled them to access scientific lectures, a library and a news room.

The members of the Circle recognised that there were many deficiencies in the provision of local education in their towns for the working class. Chapter 2 will show that education was one of the most visible ways in which the Unitarian members of the Circle attempted to make a charitable impact to assist and help improve the intellectual and moral conduct of the working class. The next chapter will illustrate how the members of the Circle used the press and helped fund and establish schools and institutions to educate the working class in their town. The need

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61 Baker, Memorials of a Dissenting Chapel, p. 56.
63 Watkin, Diary, pp. 104, 115.
64 Projected Newsroom and Literary and Scientific Institution Manchester October 1833 to December 1839, Manchester Archives +, GB127. M2 1/1, p. 25.
to educate and improve the intellectual and moral outlook of their fellow townsmen was undoubtedly influenced by the Circle’s Unitarian backgrounds. A preacher from the Cross Street Chapel, Reverend Dewey, noted that Unitarians ‘believe that the world now…is a very bad world, that the sinfulness of the world is dreadful and horrible to consider; that nations ought to be covered with sackcloth and mourning for it’. However, he added that it is not ‘depravity of nature in which we believe. Human nature is the bosom of an infant, is nothing else but capability; capability of good as well as evil…We believe…that men ought to be recovered.’

Unitarian members of the Circle recognised that though most people might not presently have the capability or capacity to act in a rational and dignified way, they could be recovered and nurtured so that they did display a capacity to act in a ‘good’ rather than an ‘evil’ manner.

Cultural interests of the members of the Little Circle

The cultural interests of the members of the Circle underscored their desire to nurture and develop their own intellectual and moral capacities. To a degree all of the Circle’s members seemed to enjoy similar bourgeois interests such as collecting art, reading, gardening, walking and attending scientific and literary lectures. These were pursuits that helped to construct and shape the Circle’s understanding of a bourgeois and rational public. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have observed how the English middle class in this period developed their own unique customs that helped to characterise themselves in a different way to the aristocracy and

65 O. Dewey, *Unitarian Christians Stated and Explained* (Manchester, 1838), pp. 15-17
Anthony Howe has stated that the ‘social identity’ of the cotton masters in Manchester, ‘reflected and reinforced its economic distinctiveness’. Patterns of inter-marriage, enrolment at private or grammar schools as well as dissenting academies, combined with foreign travel, helped portray the ‘lifestyle of the cotton masters’ as ‘that of a well-defined middle-class element in Victorian society’. Turner observed that members of the Circle were coloured by their Nonconformity, class pride, their ‘economic and social prominence’ as well as their ‘intellectual and cultural pursuits’. In this section, I explain that the members of the Circle had cultural interests that both united them as a group and that looked to improve and raise the condition of themselves and the world they saw around them.

The members of the Circle pursued cultural interests that were ‘dignified’ and appealed to their sense of rationality and intelligence. Pastimes such as drinking and gambling were seen as vices and would have been an anathema to such an understanding of appropriate conduct. Watkin was appalled at the behaviour of fellow businessmen who attended an annual dinner of the Commercial Clerks’ Society in 1822, which also included important local political figures such as the Boroughreeve. Absalom Watkin said he recalled in ‘disgust; of the beastly extremes in which too many persons in respectable situations evidently indulge’. In response to what he observed during that dinner, Watkin stated that a ‘taste for literature is certainly of great service in keeping a man from such degrading vices’. Watkin concluded that he wished to hold his ‘enjoyments in the exercise of moderation and the prosecution of useful studies’. Watkin was horrified at the general conduct of the attendants at the Commercial Clerks’ Society dinner because he did not anticipate that people would drink in excess and indulge in antics he deemed to be unsavoury. For Watkin, and for other members of the Circle, a sense of enjoyment came

70 Watkin, *Diary*, p. 97.
from the knowledge that he conducted himself in a refined and rational manner in his leisure time.

The homes of the members of the Circle were one of the principal spaces in which they attempted to make improvements and apply themselves to ‘useful studies’. The members of the Circle resided in homes which were located in relatively quiet settings. These spaces offered them the sanctuary and distance from the squalor, chaos and poverty associated with Manchester’s urban centre. The Circle’s homes were their own private refuges from the pollution and the hustle and bustle of urban life in Manchester. As John Tosh has argued, the middle-class home provided the ‘refuge from work in all its negativity’. The well-ordered home ‘promised the comforts of love and nurture, and it was a reminder of a higher scale of moral values’. Watkin noted in his diary that he intended to ‘make home the seat of my happiness: to strive to conquer sloth, petulancy, sarcasm: to behave with proper, manly kindness to my dear Elizabeth, and to my mother’. Family and the home were the forces that anchored Watkin’s life, but it was also a place that reflected his desire to present himself as an industrious and diligent person. Watkin did not appreciate the regimen of city life, believing instead of the ‘superiority of quiet, regular domestic enjoyments to all the glare’ that he encountered in cities such as Manchester.

The home was a place where members of the Circle could pursue interests such as collecting art and literature. These interests not only helped broaden their intellectual and cultural horizons, but also acted as an important form of escape from their business duties. Edward Baxter for example was particularly interested in art, and possessed over 156 paintings,

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71 Tosh, A Man’s Place, p. 30.
72 Watkin, Diary, p. 30.
73 Ibid, p. 66.
engravings and drawings by the time of his death. Many of the Circle were also voracious readers. At the time of his death, Fenton Robison Atkinson’s library exceeded 13,000 volumes. The Circle collected art and literature in order to present themselves as rational and educated men, who had taken the time, effort and expense to make improvements to their own intellectual standings. For Absalom Watkin, reading was a sanctuary and form of escapism from day to day life, but also an opportunity to enhance his moral and intellectual outlook. Watkin was described by Prentice as someone who ‘gave himself more to literature than to politics’. Nevertheless, he was very particular about the works that he read, and stated that he wanted ‘to avoid as much as possible all unprofitable and useless reading. I will give all my studies only to the best authors, and these I will read again, seeking only truth and yielding only to reason’.

Not only did Watkin think it was important to read challenging academic books, but he also said he took the effort to grapple with the ideas and concepts articulated in them by re-reading them repeatedly. It was not just a simple matter of reading something, Watkin wanted to understand and appreciate the real meaning behind an author’s words. He did not read a book passively, but rather took the effort to interpret the ideas and concepts it articulated. To an extent Watkin was forming his own internal dialogue with an author, and also cultivating his own independent judgments. Watkin’s diary is full of references to the various books he read to himself and his family. While Watkin often chose works on rhetoric such as Campbell’s The Philosophy of Rhetoric, he would read out loud books such as Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe to his children during the evening. In his opinion though the book had ‘too much

75 Atkinson Papers, Manchester Archives + M177/7/7-8.
76 Prentice, Sketches, p. 74.
77 Watkin, Diary, p. 82.
killing…especially as a book to read to children’. He recounted how his ‘children talk of killing savages quite as a thing of course since they have heard it’. The implication was that his children were highly susceptible to ideas and impressions that Watkin believed were unsavoury. Such ideas and impressions in his mind were to be avoided. However, he also believed the charm of the ‘whole work consists in the account of Crusoe’s solitary life and varied occupations on the island’. For Watkin, reading as a family was an opportunity to extract certain moral messages such as industry and the condemnation of undue and unnecessary killing. Reading a book out loud to his children reinforced the image of Watkin as a nurturing father who wanted his children to adopt a sense of morals but also a curiosity and passion for learning.

Watkin had a curious mind and sought to apply his intellect to other cultural interests such as the opera. However, Watkin was very disappointed with an opera he went to see on 19 January 1832. By all accounts the musician performing ‘Paganini’s fiddle’ was supposed to be a ‘wonderful performer’. But Watkin, who admitted he was ‘no musician’, said he could not ‘appreciate his performance’, stating further that it ‘surprised me a little, but did not delight me, because it awakened no feeling’. Despite the fact that Watkin did not enjoy this musical performance, his attendance at this event demonstrated that he was making a clear effort to expand his appreciation for different subject matters. The members of the Circle were open to new experiences and consequently made attempts to heighten their understanding of different subject matters and to learn new things. This attitude reinforced their understanding that it was important to listen to and expose themselves to alternative ideas and notions of which they were not familiar. As we shall see later in chapters 2 and 3, one of the key aspects of the Circle’s

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79 Watkin, Diary, p. 102.
‘liberal’ character was their capacity to form opinions that were sensitive to ideas that were
different to their own.

Travel was another leisure pursuit some members of the Circle embraced in order to expand
their intellectual and cultural horizons. Absalom Watkin travelled to London in his early
twenties with two other companions called Grime and Andrew. For Watkin, a visit to London
was an opportunity to take in many tourist sites such as Westminster Abbey and famous parks
and bridges. Whilst looking around Westminster Abbey and St Paul’s Cathedral, he examined
various monuments and the tombs of different Kings and Queens. Aside from his trip being a
chance to make a pilgrimage to some of the capital’s most famous religious sites, Watkin also
recounted how he had time to see a ‘silly’ burlesque show in Covent Garden Theatre, called
‘Bombastes Furioso’.82 Not only was travel an opportunity for Watkin to expand his religious
and spiritual development, but it was also fundamentally a chance to enjoy himself by engaging
with new interests such as the theatre.

Richard Potter also spent a great deal of his spare time travelling, with the agreement that his
brother should manage the family business. Such an understanding with his brother helped him
to expand his interests beyond the commercial world and allowed him to develop his
fascination with the political.83 Richard Potter travelled around the British Isles and also around
Ireland. These were not business trips, but rather voyages of discovery and intrigue. In 1807
Potter visited sites such as the Houses of Parliament, where he watched the closing of the
Westminster election, which returned Sir Francis Burdett and Lord Cochrane. In December
1809 Potter visited Ireland, where he hired a horse and journeyed the surrounding countryside

82 Ibid, pp. 60-8.
83 Potter Collection, Volume 3, pp. 110, 7-9, 38-9, 40-1; G. Meinertzhagen, From Ploughshare to Parliament: A
of Dublin and Ballamore. From his perspective, Ireland was in an ‘unhappy state’ and that ‘wretchedness’ appeared everywhere’. Potter complained that the corn he saw in farms was ‘completely spoilt’.\textsuperscript{84} His travels to Ireland and his observations concerning the state of the farms potentially helped to galvanise his future political interest in Irish affairs, notably education, and the promotion of humanitarian efforts to ameliorate the condition of the poor and those suffering from starvation.\textsuperscript{85}

Other leisure activities, such as gardening and agriculture, reflected the Circle’s desire to shape the world around them into something positive and attractive. Watkin spent his time helping to cultivate his own small garden at home. Watkin liked to imagine how he could improve the aesthetics of various gardens he visited. On one occasion, he visited a new house in Didsbury Road where he imagined how the state of the property could be ‘much improved by planting’. That night Watkin recalled how he read Cobbett’s ‘Gardener’ before he went to sleep.\textsuperscript{86} Whilst Watkin might have seen gardening as a way to help improve the aesthetics of a house or estate, his interest in it also underscored his awareness and determination to improve the world he saw around him. During his youth in Tadcaster, Richard Potter spent time working on the farm of his father. He said that he became ‘very fond of plowing’ for it was ‘so healthful an exercise’ and that it was an ‘employment that conduces to our very existence, and, above all, raises such high ideas of nature in our minds’.\textsuperscript{87} Potter evidently had an enthusiasm for nature, but also demonstrated that he was prepared to attempt some form of manual labour to ensure his farm in Tadcaster was maintained effectively. Working with a plough also brought Potter closer to nature and helped convince him of the benefits of using time, physical energy and effort to make improvements to his fields. When he ultimately moved to Manchester, Richard Potter

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid, p. 47.  
\textsuperscript{85} Turner, \textit{Reform and Respectability}, p. 189.  
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid p. 58, 158.  
\textsuperscript{87} Richard Potter quoted in Meinertzhagen, \textit{From Ploughshare to Parliament}, p. 25
redirected this enthusiasm for nature towards horticulture. Indeed, both Richard and Thomas Potter were founding members of the prestigious Floral and Horticultural Society (1821) and Botanical Society (1827). These societies were largely concerned with learning about how to nurture and grow various plants and vegetables through scientific approaches.

It was also important, the members of the Circle believed, to have a healthy body as well as a sharp and focused mind. Richard Potter, speaking in 1838 during a meeting held at the Manchester Athenaeum, said that ‘a good education is the preparation of men for usefulness and happiness’, but he also noted the importance of ‘the right development, and cultivation, and direction, of all his powers, physical, intellectual, and moral. It implies instruction in all the branches of knowledge which are necessary to useful and efficient action in the sphere of the individual’. A crucial aspect of such a rounded education was the inclusion of ‘physical training, which is to render the body capable of executing the purpose of the soul’.88 Walking was an opportunity for exercise in which many members of the Circle engaged. When Watkin went for a walk on Kersal Moor with his friends Mr Spencer and John Edward Taylor, he complained that his companions did not ‘walk fast enough or far enough for me. The walks I take with them are not exercise, only sauntering’.89 Clearly, for Watkin walking had to involve a significant degree of physical exertion and effort.

Walking for other members of the Circle was not just about exercising the body, but was instead an opportunity to enjoy a sense of solitude and space to contemplate and deliberate issues they felt were pressing to them. Penelope Corfield has noted that walking in the eighteenth century

88 *Manchester Guardian*, 17 October 1838.
89 Watkin, *Diary*, pp. 12, 15, 156.
was about ‘social peregrination, perception, challenge, and engagement’. More recently, Nathan Booth has observed that walking provided the opportunity for men ‘to manage their emotions in relative privacy’. Although walking offered the freedom for men to enjoy the outdoors, Booth also stipulated that it was a chance for ‘intimate family moments and solitude in times of emotional distress’. For example, Watkin used walks to both consider and discuss a great variety of issues, from novels to romantic feelings. On one occasion Watkin described how a late-night walk ‘near eleven at night’ convinced him that ‘to take an interest in the affairs of our fellow-man is a great source of comfortable feeling’. After this walk Watkin appeared to feel rejuvenated and positive about the role he could play in transforming the lives of his fellow townsmen. Aside from offering the space and time to exercise and think, this walk was a moment that separated him from the business and politics of everyday life, which he found wearing. By separating himself from these issues and finding the time to walk and gather his thoughts, he was able to feel refreshed and in possession of a clearer mind.

For other Circle members such as Archibald Prentice, walking was also a social venture that allowed him to converse and deliberate with like-minded people and friends. Prentice visited Jeremy Bentham in 1832, noting that after ‘a short conversation he invited me to accompany him in his daily walk round the garden, and there I accommodated my pace to his quick shuffle, and we held converse on the promotion of the greatest happiness of the greatest number’. Walking was thus an opportunity for Prentice and Bentham to bond and discuss a philosophical issue that they both found engaging.

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92 Watkin, *Diary*, pp. 115, 151.

93 Prentice, *Sketches*, p. 381.
The members of the Circle were eager for everyone in Manchester to explore and enjoy the countryside through walking, and they believed it was a public right to have access to well-maintained footpaths. Richard Potter, Shuttleworth, Prentice and Watkin helped form the Footpath Society in 1824. This society helped settle local disputes with farmers and landowners regarding right of access and maintenance of public walkways. Through this society Prentice hoped that ‘the humblest of our population’ would have free access to the countryside, ‘injuriously touching nothing and destroying nothing’, thus proving that ‘the poor will be conservative, even of beauty, when confidingly trusted’.\(^9^4\) Members of the Circle were eager to share their cultural interests with the poor in Manchester. The Footpath Society sought to persuade and encourage the working-class to explore the countryside and gain an appreciation for the world around them. Simultaneously, walking in the countryside, and ensuring that they conserved the footpaths and the nature that surrounded them, was an opportunity to show that the working class could be trusted to act in a respectful way. By doing so, it was hoped that the working class would echo the characteristics and expectations middle-class men such as the members of the Circle placed on themselves.

In addition to being a society that was designed to encourage everyone to enjoy walking and the countryside, the Footpath Society was a forum that developed a reputation for safeguarding the interests of the people of Manchester. The Footpath Society built up a significant reputation in Manchester as well as other towns across Britain for the way it challenged local authorities.\(^9^5\) This society was an important foregrounding and apprenticeship for the Circle’s future.

\(^9^4\) Ibid, p. 121.
\(^9^5\) Cowdroy’s Gazette, 8 May 24 July, 31 July; Potter Collection, Volume 4, p. 34; Prentice, Sketches, pp. 289-92; John Shuttleworth Scrapbook, Manchester Archives +, GB127.BR f 324.942733 S3.
activities with other organisations and with the local elites in their town. As Turner has noted, the Society’s activities ‘combined a concern about the public’s opportunity for healthy recreation with a reformist disposition’. This ideal was set ‘against the selfish exercise of power by those who traditionally possessed political and social influence’. Prentice questioned in his history whether ‘these trifles’ were ‘beneath the notice of the historian?’. In response, he suggested that an interest in ‘small things keeps alive the spirit of resistance to greater just encroachments’.

The impact of Peterloo on the members of the Little Circle

Though the cultural, religious and social dynamics that bound together and shaped the ideas of the members of the Circle are crucial to understanding this group of men, it is also important to recognise that the events of Peterloo rallied the members of the Circle together into a coherent political unit. This section shows how the dramatic events of 16 August 1819, at St Peter’s field in Manchester, taught the members of the Circle that there was a growing need for individuals such as themselves to act as a mediating force in politics between what they perceived to be reactionary Tories and hot-headed radicals. Peterloo fundamentally influenced the way the members of the Circle came to identify themselves as a political group in Manchester. While historians have long debated the reasons why the events of Peterloo unfolded in the way that they did, our understanding of how this day influenced and helped shape the identity of middle-class reformers in a post-1819 context is more obscured. This section argues that the events of Peterloo persuaded the members of the Circle that political change had to be effected through a more deliberative and rational brand of middle-class extra-parliamentary politics. Peterloo might have been an event that shocked and disturbed the

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96 Turner, Reform and Respectability, p. 173.
97 Prentice, Sketches, p. 121.
members of the Circle. However, it was also one that heavily influenced the way they thought about themselves as viable and potentially effective political mediators in early nineteenth-century Manchester.

The manner in which the Circle responded to the events of Peterloo contrasted with that of other contemporary reformers in Manchester. Katrina Navickas has noted that ‘Cross-Pennine support for the Peterloo victims was immediate. The impact of Peterloo quickly became a factor unifying disparate reform groups across the North, and indeed the whole country’, so that radical leaders began to organise ‘demonstrations of mourning combined with defiance’. 99

The continued use of the mass platform was only one specific act of defiance that emerged in the years following the Peterloo Massacre. 100 Although the members of the Circle commemorated and eulogized the memory of the victims of Peterloo, they also wanted to distance themselves from this event. Instead they preferred to emphasise their capacity to engage in a rational and deliberative discussion. Peterloo taught the members of the Circle about the importance of addressing political questions not through mass public meeting, but via rational debate within legally sanctioned indoor local political forums.

Notwithstanding the fact that all the members of the Circle lived in Manchester in 1819, Prentice, Shuttleworth and Baxter were the only members of the Circle who witnessed the processions that marched through Manchester on 16 August 1819. Prentice said that he ‘laughed at the fears of the magistrates’, but he was also concerned that these same local

99 Navickas, Loyalism, p. 87.
officials would overreact and treat the protestors harshly and without impunity. Prentice mentioned that he ‘occasionally asked the women if they were not afraid to be there’ and that the usual reply was “What have we to be afraid of?” 101 The 60,000 to 80,000 protestors at St Peter’s field who came to listen to Henry Hunt speak about parliamentary reform famously misjudged the temperament of their own town’s local yeomanry. 102

The members of the Circle condemned the tactics and response initiated by the Manchester cavalry and accordingly signed their names to a Declaration of Rights and Protest of the ‘respectable classes’ in Manchester, which criticised the harsh treatment initiated by Nadin and his cavalry. This declaration stated that ‘we, the undersigned, without individually approving of the manner in which the meeting held at St Peter’s on Monday…was perfectly peaceable’. The declaration also stated that ‘no seditious or intemperate harangues were made there; that the Riot Act, if read at all, was read privately, or without the knowledge of the great body of the meeting’. 103 At Lancaster, in a case known as Redford vs Birley (1822), Shuttleworth stated that there had been a calculated attempt by the cavalry to attack the crowd. 104 A subscription was additionally raised by its members for those who had been injured as a result of the actions of Nadin and his cavalry. 105 Members of the Circle also tried to launch a national inquiry into the conduct of the cavalry at Peterloo: an initiative that earned them recognition in other towns across Britain, such as Nottingham. 106

101 Prentice, Sketches, p. 139.
103 Manchester Gazette, 25 March 1820, 8 April 1820.
104 Manchester Gazette, 13 April 1822.
105 Prentice, Sketches, pp. 64-5;
106 Richard Potter Collection, Volume 3, p. 283.
Though the members of the Circle signed their name to a resolution which condemned the conduct of the authorities at Peterloo, the members of the Circle also recognised that the crowd present on 16 August might have deliberately armed themselves to provoke a confrontation. Taylor for example stated that he had ‘probably no reason to doubt that they [the working class] have to a considerable extent provided themselves with arms as the means of defence’. He also observed that he had ‘not a word to say in defence of the presumption, vulgarity, and violence, of some self-styled reformers, on one hand, but I certainly do think the inhumanity, the ignorance, and the rancorous bitterness of many anti-reformers, equally inexcusable on the other’. Taylor further stated that ‘for my part, I am no alarmist…but I admit that I cannot contemplate without some uneasiness the conduct which the measures of the 16th of August were so obviously calculated to produce’. Taylor believed that both sides at Peterloo behaved badly and his comments suggest a lack of trust and belief in the capacity for local officials and political protestors to engage in a coherent and productive dialogue with one another. Peterloo was a political event that underscored a growing working-class appetite and demand for parliamentary reform and representation. The tactics utilised that day, in the Circle’s estimation, were indicative of a radical and transgressive attempt to influence political change. As much as the Circle’s members wanted parliamentary reform, they believed that it had to be secured in a way that did not resort to violence or in a manner that provoked their town’s local authorities.

Certainly, the members of the Circle believed it was important to mobilise significant numbers of supporters, but there was also an understanding that most people could not be trusted to follow a prescribed and rational course of action. The Circle also understood that the local

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109 Turner, Reform and Respectability, p. 56.
Anglican-Tory hierarchy in Manchester were uncomfortable with the presence of mass popular action and protest. Mass popular politics, such as the march of the Blanketeers in 1817 and Peterloo in 1819, was felt to be synonymous with revolution and political insurrection.\textsuperscript{110} Robert Poole has stipulated that the march of the Blanketeers in 1817 combined with ‘the abortive risings that followed it’ as well as the mass ‘rallies of citizens in 1819’ were designed ‘as irresistible reminders of the popular foundations of sovereignty, intended to bring about the effects of rebellion without the need for actual armed force’.\textsuperscript{111}

Prentice and his allies in the Circle did not see such events as sensible and legitimate displays of popular sovereignty. Instead he observed that the ‘blanket meeting and the blanket march were, of all possible devices, the least likely to convince the middle and the aristocratic classes that the multitudes were fitted for the enjoyment of the electoral franchise’.\textsuperscript{112} Mass popular meetings had the potential to provoke a political disturbance, which in turn could lead to a more significant and violent uprising.\textsuperscript{113} Such mass meetings were thought to prove to the authorities that the bulk of the people of Manchester were only capable of organising an unruly and belligerent protest, rather than highlighting how they could perform the role of a rational and thoughtful voter. Whilst Peterloo might have highlighted a strong working-class demand for radical reform, the members of the Circle wanted to adopt political tactics that drew attention to the capacity of the middle class in Manchester to make a political case in a deliberative and reasonable manner.


\textsuperscript{111} Poole, ‘French Revolution or Peasants’ Revolt?’, p. 22

\textsuperscript{112} Prentice, \textit{Sketches}, p. 94.

Peterloo taught the members of the Circle that it was necessary for a small body such as themselves to act as mediators between the local elites and the more radical working classes in their town. As Poole has noted, the ‘authorities and the reformers drew different lessons’ from the events of Peterloo. For the reformers, Peterloo persuaded them that there was a need for openness and mass support; whereas the authorities became suspicious of mass popular political activities.114 Yet the middle class in Manchester were also forced to realise that they could no longer remain silent politically. Writing in his Notes and Observations, John Edward Taylor suggested ‘that when the people were silent as to reform, the mere statement that they were so, was held to be a sufficient answer to all the arguments in its favour’. Nevertheless, he also argued that for a ‘majority of our labouring population’ who have ‘loudly demanded a change in the representative system, the cry for that change is to be stifled by brute force’. This was ‘because the people have not uttered it precisely in the tone most agreeable to the delicate and sensitive nerves of the advocates of existing abuses’.115 Importantly, Taylor stressed that the middle classes ‘must interfere with domestic politics, because politics will interfere with them’, and therefore ‘a more conciliatory mode of conduct must be adopted, than that which has recently been in fashion’.116

The members of the Circle sensed that the period after Peterloo raised a significant opportunity to promote a different brand of extra-parliamentary politics. Peterloo propelled the members of the Circle towards the political forefront in Manchester and its neighbouring towns, and reinforced their identity as political spokesmen and representatives. Archibald Prentice wrote the following observation in his Historical Sketches:

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114 Poole, ‘By the Law of the Sword’, p. 264.
115 Taylor, Notes and Observations, p. xv.
A coercive repression of the public utterance of opinion often tends to facilitate its quiet private adoption and progress. Reform principles made considerable advances during the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act...the noisiest of the radical orators were silenced...In the forced silence of the mere trading demagogues – many of the men who would rather harangue from the platform than ply the shuttle – the middle classes could calmly think of their own exclusion from political rights, and on the results of defective representation, as shown in the wretched legislation and tyrannical proceedings of a “borough-mongering” government.  

While figures such as Henry Hunt were imprisoned after Peterloo, self-described rational thinking and respectable men such as the members of the Circle discovered the time and space to approach politics in a rational and deliberative manner. This rational approach was firmly rooted in Manchester’s traditional, ‘legitimate’ political institutions such as the Court Leet, Vestry and Police Commission.

In effect, the Little Circle appointed themselves as spokesman and guardians of the interests of the working classes. Archibald Prentice believed that the ‘working men…were powerless, and could not meet to deliberate without danger to their personal liberty’ in the period after Peterloo.  

It was necessary therefore for an intelligent and rational body, such as the members of the Circle, to act for and speak up on the behalf of the working man. The way in which the members of the Circle responded to Peterloo made them appear to some as political outsiders in Manchester. Although the Circle thought that they were acting as the guardians and representatives of the working classes of Manchester, many found their political activities untrustworthy and out of sync with the wider interests of the community. As we shall see in chapters 3 and 4, the members of the Circle were frequently treated with contempt by certain elements of the Manchester populace, particularly those who followed the political speeches and writings of William Cobbett and Henry Hunt.

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117 Prentice, Sketches, pp. 115-16.
118 Ibid, p. 68.
Despite the negative treatment they received, the members of the Circle were not deterred. Rather the Circle understood that they were a very small and selective group who approached politics in a different way from contemporary and past reformers in Manchester. They believed they were the torchbearers of a new generation of middle-class and Nonconformist political reformers who were linked to early reformist struggles. In particular, the Circle identified themselves with an earlier group of reformers that operated in the 1790s, which included men such as Thomas Walker, George Philips and Thomas Cooper. Speaking at a meeting held in the Town Hall in 1831, to discuss and petition for parliamentary reform, Richard Potter gestured to the crowd and said, ‘this is the son of the late venerable Thomas Walker…I rejoice to see the day when his principles are cherished by a whole people’. By making this comment, Richard Potter was connecting himself to an earlier form of reform politics in Manchester: particularly, in relation to parliamentary representation.

The memory of the 1790 reformers clearly chimed with the political attitudes of the Circle several decades later. Both the 1790 reformers and the members of the Circle identified themselves as a body of reformers who sought to challenge, expose and broadcast the political inadequacies of local officials and government. Prentice described the Circle as “a small band” of men in Manchester’ who thought ‘about the question of reform from the tyrannical proceedings of government’. The members of the Circle defined themselves against these tyrannical proceedings, and by their capacity to stand up against the perceived injustices perpetuated by the local magistrates. Fundamentally, and particularly after 1819, the Circle thought about themselves as a confident and resilient middle-class political group, who

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119 *Manchester Times*, 24 September 1831.
believed they were in a position to make a valuable political contribution as a conciliatory force in Manchester politics.

**Conclusion**

The members of the Little Circle were a highly confident and ambitious middle-class and Nonconformist political group. Perhaps the most significant element in the identity of the members of the Circle was their various Nonconformist religious backgrounds. Whether a particular member of the Circle was a Unitarian, Bible Christian, Methodist or Presbyterian, they all harboured a profound desire to perform a public duty. Crucially, their religious beliefs also promoted a common interest in uncovering the truth through rational deliberation. Engaging with issues and discussing them with others were essential tenets of the various faiths followed by the members of the Circle. The Circle were also united by their members’ shared motivation to improve their minds. Whether it was attending scientific lectures or reading books at home, the members of the Circle believed it was important to expand their intellectual horizons. The Circle’s bourgeois interests reinforced their determination to cultivate a rational and deliberative public that would improve the world around them. Outside of the forum of local politics, the members of the Circle pursued leisure interests that continued to help define them as a rational, intelligent and industrious people.

Above all else, the members of the Circle are remembered for their political activities in Manchester. Regardless of whether a particular member decided to run for political office or fill a more peripheral role drafting petitions or giving occasional speeches in public meetings, all the members of the Circle attempted to make a political contribution. Certain members of the Circle such as John Edward Taylor, Archibald Prentice, and John Shuttleworth initially applied their ideas about politics in the press. Other formats such as the court room were also
used by the members of the Circle to offer a rational challenge to the local Tory elite. However, it took the events of Peterloo to shake the members of the Circle into a sense of collective and assertive political action. Peterloo was a turning point not only for the Circle but also other political groups in this period. For the Little Circle’s members, the events and aftermath of Peterloo revealed to them the value of asserting their political demands in more public and legitimate political forums, which the authorities in their town could not criticise. Though the Circle recognised there was a need to showcase their demand for a political issue, they were cautious to alarm the authorities in their town. Whereas other historians of the early nineteenth century have focused on the rise of the mass platform and mass popular politics following Peterloo, they have ignored the way political groups such as the Circle sought to address their grievances in more familiar and established political forums. Despite being treated as religious and political outsiders at times, the Circle remained a highly confident and assertive political group who had considerable influence on the political landscape in which they operated.
Chapter 2: The key ideas of the Little Circle

In 1851, in a history of Manchester between 1792 and 1832, the newspaper editor and Circle member Archibald Prentice noted that the individuals who comprised the Little Circle were ‘faithful, amongst the faithless, to liberal principles’. This chapter develops our understanding of what these ‘liberal principles’ entailed. Historians have observed that the members of the Circle represented a visible and influential liberal group in Manchester between 1812 and 1846. Michael Turner has suggested that the Circle’s liberal nature was defined by the way they believed in ‘progress, reform, freedom and inquiry’, combined with a desire to protect and extend ‘the dignity, rights and opportunities of all’. Whilst this chapter does not challenge this interpretation of what it meant to be a liberal in early nineteenth-century Manchester, it does argue that the Circle’s particular brand of liberalism was underpinned by their understanding of who was best placed to safeguard and represent the interests of society as a whole. In this chapter, I argue that the members of the Circle believed a small, rational, male and middle-class public had the capacity to lead and represent the political and social interests of all people who resided in Manchester.

As well as referring to themselves as ‘reformers’, the label ‘liberal’ was occasionally used by the members of the Circle. Joseph Coohill has shown how politicians defined themselves as liberals in parliamentary guides, despite the fact that such labels retained a certain sense of ambiguity and lacked a clear definition. Though historians have tended to focus on

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‘government and leadership’ and the strategies deployed by ‘Liberal politicians’ to guide the people, our understanding of what it meant to be a liberal in the constituencies has not been as thoroughly researched. Until 1832, when Richard Potter and Joseph Brotherton became MPs for Wigan and Salford respectively, the members of the Circle were not political leaders at Westminster or even officials within Manchester’s local political institutions. Instead, they were a group who engaged with political issues and attempted to shape public opinion in their town. The members of the Circle were part of a larger, very visible and vocal liberal movement in Manchester that sought to safeguard principles such as religious freedom, free trade, and parliamentary reform. They defended the rule of law and attempted to make politics more open and transparent.

David Craig has observed that “‘liberalism’ did not securely mark out a single intellectual phenomenon’. Yet at the same time Craig has also noted that ‘it was widely accepted that “liberal opinions” were growing in strength’ during the early nineteenth century and that there were ‘various attempts to characterize what they were’, particularly in periodicals such as The Liberal. On the whole though, liberalism in this period was not centred around a strict political ideology. Instead historians have shown that liberalism across Britain during the early nineteenth century was regarded as being both open and tolerant of different conflicting views and opinions. Jonathan Parry has noted that over the period 1830 to 1886, Whig-Liberal statesman believed in ‘open politics’ and that the British people had ‘common, not clashing economic interests’. Additionally, Coohill has noted that a core strength of the Liberal Party

after 1832, when there was a coalescence of different reform groups in Parliament, was that it was able to ‘exist in this general atmosphere of liberality without becoming permanently fragmented on individual issues, because its members were willing to allow a degree of disagreement within their ranks’. 129

In Manchester, members of the Circle connected with other notable local allies such as R.H. Greg and Mark Philips around liberal principles such as free trade, parliamentary reform and local municipal reform. Liberals in Manchester were comprised of middle-class men who believed they had a preeminent intellect and understanding of the political and social issues affecting their town and fellow countrymen. This chapter explains that liberals in Manchester formed a separate public, that was distinct from the rest of the population. Hannah Barker has observed that during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, contemporaries were often ‘vague and divided’ over their definitions of ‘the people’, ‘the public’ and ‘public opinion’, and that because of this sense of ambiguity, historians have found it difficult to ‘pin down’ a definition of these concepts. Yet she also noted that it is clear that Britain ‘witnessed the emergence of a dynamic extra-parliamentary political culture’ and that ‘opinion was being formed and expressed which was at once powerful, coherent, and legitimate’. 130 In Manchester, the Little Circle was key to this developing political culture, and actively sought to take a lead

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in the formation of public opinion in their town. As this chapter will show, its members considered themselves to be the natural leaders of opinion.

Liberal-minded individuals such as the Circle’s members understood that only they, and other men like them, should be in a position to lead public opinion and articulate the interests of Manchester. They were not convinced that the majority of the city’s other inhabitants were equally as capable. My argument chimes with Alan Kahan’s observation that a distinctive feature of nineteenth-century liberalism was that members of the public had to have the intellectual capacity to be able to vote in elections. At the same time, this study also enhances Kahan’s assessment of what ‘liberalism’ meant in this period by examining how the members of the Circle went about applying this understanding of intellectual capacity to their vision of the people, the public and reform. Although some of the wider population may have been aggrieved that their interests were not being served, the members of the Little Circle felt themselves to be the individuals who truly understood the needs of the community and ensured that the greater good was protected. As such they did not advocate a representative system of government, which placed emphasis on a ‘general will’. Their conception of the public was thus a restricted one, linked to the idea that individuals had to be fully capable of interpreting and understanding the political and social issues affecting their town and country.

Linking the Circle’s ideas about the complexion and role of the public in the formation of public opinion to those concerning ‘reform’, adds a further dimension to the existing historical literature surrounding the formation of liberal middle-class political ideas in Manchester before, and subsequent to, the passage of the 1832 Reform Act. Dror Wahrman has argued that

131 Kahan, *Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, p. 27.
the rising ‘middle classes’ were not the ‘the crucial factor in bringing about the Reform Bill of 1832’, rather ‘it was the Reform Bill of 1832 that was the crucial factor in cementing the invention of the ever-rising “middle class”’. While Wahrman has explained that events culminating in the 1832 Act shaped a middle-class consciousness, this thesis shows how the political ideas and opinions of middle-class groups, such as the members of the Circle, helped construct a clear middle-class political identity well before the Reform Act was passed, which equated to their understanding of a reasoning public. The members of the Circle believed that those who should be enfranchised by the Reform Act were intelligent and commercially-minded middle-class men such as themselves. They also believed that a reformed parliamentary system required the integration of a public who were morally and intellectually reformed individuals.

This chapter will use a range of sources including newspapers, sermons, personal papers, diaries and official documents, such as the Boroughreeve’s papers, to consider firstly the Little Circle’s conceptions of the people and the public, and secondly, their ideas about reform. Because the members of the Circle frequently read, cited and corresponded with Jeremy Bentham, this chapter will also draw on some of his works, particularly in relation to his notion of a ‘public opinion tribunal’. After reflecting on what shaped his own political outlook, one member of the Circle, Archibald Prentice, noted that:

I had long held the name Bentham in high veneration. His writings had been my political textbooks, and, as he had been an author nearly twenty years before I was born, my first impression of them were as precious legacies from the mighty dead, rather than as the productions of a contemporary.

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133 D. Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c.1780-1840* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 18, 413-30.
Another member of the Circle, Richard Potter, exchanged several letters with Bentham. Though theirs does not appear to have been a close relationship, the two discussed issues including law reform, the Manchester electorate, and their mutual friend Dr John Bowring.\textsuperscript{136} Prentice also corresponded with Bentham, and he had the additional distinction of meeting him at his London residence during April 1831, a month after the first English Reform Bill was introduced.\textsuperscript{137}

The first section of this chapter examines the Little Circle’s interpretation of ‘the people’. I argue that this term was used to refer to the wide and diverse population of Manchester and Britain as a whole. Members of the Circle believed the people had the potential and the future capacity to help articulate and shape political opinions in Manchester. However, they were also of the opinion that the majority of people did not fully appreciate the political and social circumstances of their town. The second section of this chapter demonstrates that the members of the Circle formed a part of a distinctive male and middle-class public, that represented the wider interests of the people of Manchester. In this section, I argue that the public was separate from the idea of the people in the minds of the members of the Little Circle. Although this section does recognise that there were alternative publics present in Manchester, composed of different groups of people, my focus is directed towards the male and middle-class public that the Circle understood to be the public. This public utilised forums such as the press and indoor meetings to deliberate and to try to construct public opinion.

The third section of this chapter analyses how the members of the Circle evaluated the objectives of parliamentary reform. Aside from being a measure to offer unrepresented towns

\textsuperscript{136} Richard Potter, London School of Economics - COLL MISC 0146, Volume 12, pp. 251-252.

\textsuperscript{137} Prentice, \textit{Sketches}, pp. 379-381.
such as Manchester an MP, the members of the Circle believed that parliamentary reform should offer a moderate increase to the franchise: so that it incorporated middle-class men such as themselves. The members of the Circle believed they should have the vote because they felt that they had the capacity to make a positive contribution to the political processes of their country. Most people in their eyes did not have the similar capacity to be trusted with the vote and to make a sensible and rational contribution to politics, which is not to say that the people at large did not possess the potential to make a future positive political contribution. The final section of this chapter examines how the Circle linked the idea of parliamentary reform with education. In their estimation, an efficient and productive reformed parliamentary system required the input of citizens who were educated and understood the roles and responsibilities of the vote. Education was the principal way that the members of the Circle believed a reformed parliamentary system could grow and incorporate a wider and more diverse franchise.

**The People**

Historians have often equated the notion of the people with the working class or ‘the mob’. E.P. Thompson suggested that the idea of the people was interchangeable with the idea of the dispossessed, and those who were fighting for their own liberty. More recently, Gareth Stedman Jones and Patrick Joyce have analysed the concept of the people as a body of predominantly labouring individuals, who were not necessarily restricted by rigid notions of class but by a shared experienced of language. Importantly for Joyce and Jones, ‘the people’ also had a more universal meaning that transcended class-based economic conditions, and was defined by political exclusion rather than occupational status, income or socio-economic category. According to Joyce, the people were bound by a ‘spirit of universalism’ and a ‘multiplicity of outcomes, class only being one of the ways which people … gave meaning to

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the social order’. According to this reading, labouring men in particular could be united with more affluent individuals because they had a common set of political ideas and aspirations.\textsuperscript{139} James Vernon has additionally noted that by ‘making the people synonymous with the unrepresented in this way, radicals continued to highlight and emphasise the popular sense of exclusion, of powerlessness and dispossession’.\textsuperscript{140}

Contemporary political elites offered more restrictive definitions of who they thought the people were. For the Tories, the people were those individuals who were members of the electorate.\textsuperscript{141} When discussing the Six Acts, a series of legislation passed in 1819 that curtailed the popular involvement in public meetings to prevent the spread of radicalism, Jonathan Fulcher has argued that the government made a concerted effort to define the constitution and the people’s role within it. Fulcher noted that the government defined the people as the ‘Nobility, Gentry, Clergy and Freeholders, because these people were allowed to attend public meetings sanctioned by a local official.\textsuperscript{142} The Whigs, on the other hand, had a far less restrictive understanding of the people. However, their definition still only encompassed male property owners. Furthermore, liberals such as Lord Henry Brougham and Viscount Althorp suggested that the people were synonymous with the middle class.\textsuperscript{143}

Contemporary Manchester newspapers such as the \textit{Manchester Times} and \textit{Manchester Guardian} defined the people in different ways depending on the context in which they were discussed. Often these papers mentioned one segment of the population by harnessing prefatory


\textsuperscript{141} Ibid, pp. 301-2.


\textsuperscript{143} Parry, \textit{Rise and Fall of Liberal Government}, p. 28.
adjectives such as ‘working-people’, ‘Irish people’ or ‘Catholic people’. In other instances, they wrote about ‘the people of Manchester’ or the people of other townships across Britain.144 They also specified on occasion that they were talking about ‘the people of Britain’ as a whole.145 For these papers, the people could be synonymous with the entire population of the country. In an illuminating article entitled ‘Can a Nation be Too Rich?’, the Manchester Times suggested that it could not answer this question without ‘distinguishing between a people and a state’. Whereas a state could never have more wealth at its command than could be deployed for the general good, a people could be too rich. Commercial people preferred to ‘collect wealth rather than distribute it’ in this paper’s view. The Manchester Times added that ‘the poverty of one part of the people seems to increase in the same ration as the riches of another’.146 The people appeared in this article as an amalgamation of different groups, which included both the richest and poorest elements of society. While these papers did at times offer more restrictive definitions of the people, notably when referring to one specific segment of society, the idea of the people was usually an all-encompassing concept.

Members of the Circle believed that the will of the entire British people had to be respected and represented. According to the Manchester Times, the aristocracy only presented ‘an interest adverse to the interests of the people’.147 It was the ambition of the members of the Circle to offer ‘deliverance of the people of this country, from the subjection of the aristocracy’.148 The people’s interests were important to the members of the Circle because they were the majority, whereas the aristocracy only represented the vested interests of a minority. In a speech held

144 For example, see Manchester Guardian, 5 February 1825; Manchester Times, 11 April 1829; Manchester Times, 30 May 1829; Manchester Guardian, 26 January 1833.
145 For example, see Manchester Guardian, 8 December 1827; Manchester Times, 26 December 1828; Manchester Times, 15 October 1831; Manchester Guardian, 18 May 1844; Manchester Guardian, 20 July 1844; Manchester Guardian, 31 August 1844.
146 Manchester Times, 27 June 1829.
147 Manchester Times, 24 January 1831.
148 Manchester Times, 22 January 1831.
during a dinner in his honour in 1837, Joseph Brotherton declared that he ‘should always look to the desires and wishes of the people’. Whilst also adding the Tories looked to safeguard the interests of ‘the few’ rather than ‘the many’.\textsuperscript{149} This idea of supporting the many had a clear link to Bentham’s utilitarian ‘greatest happiness’ principle, which stated that the interests of the many outweighed those of the few.\textsuperscript{150}

Though they believed that governments should be determined by the will of the people, the members of the Circle believed that they were in a better position than the majority of people to understand their true interests. The members of the Circle stood apart from radicals who believed, as James Epstein has argued, that the franchise should be based on a shared language of ‘popular constitutionalisms’. Radicals claimed that historic constitutional changes such as Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights and the Glorious Revolution guaranteed all people access to the vote.\textsuperscript{151} They argued that everybody – regardless of rank or social status – should be included in the franchise, and demanded constitutional reform and universal manhood suffrage. By contrast, the members of the Circle opposed those ‘radicals’ who sought to extend popular rights, above all the right to vote, in ways that seemed to them to be indiscriminate and arbitrary.\textsuperscript{152} Yet members of the Circle still respected the idea that political power theoretically emanated from the people. For example, a toast was made during a dinner held in honour of Richard Potter in Wigan in 1835, which stated that ‘the people’ were ‘the source of all legitimate power’. The \textit{Manchester Guardian} commented that this was a rare toast that was rarely heard in ‘conservative meetings’.

\textsuperscript{149} Manchester Guardian, 1 November 1837.


\textsuperscript{153} Manchester Guardian, 24 October 1835.
legitimate power’ was articulated regularly by radicals. Indeed, it was one of the key declarations made at Peterloo.\textsuperscript{154} The fact that this toast was made at a dinner celebrating Richard Potter indicated a desire to demonstrate that they were sympathetic – although not completely supportive – towards ideas such as universal suffrage. Those at the dinner did not view themselves as a self-interested group, but as people who were genuinely interested in representing the political and social issues affecting the majority of British people.

In 1837 the same toast was offered during a dinner held to celebrate the parliamentary career of Brotherton, where once again it was declared that the ‘people are the source of all legitimate power’ in their country. In his speech, Brotherton proposed that any future parliamentary reform bill should be supported in order to ensure that all ‘legitimate power emanates from the people’.\textsuperscript{155} But such pronouncements did not mean that the members of the Circle had become any more sympathetic to the idea of immediately enfranchising all people, as they still believed that power should lie with those best placed to represent and safeguard the true interests of the majority. Though the members of the Circle agreed that the will of the people had to be respected and listened to, they also believed that most people were not fully aware or appreciative of their true interests, nor could they be trusted to understand how to wield political power.

Yet in the minds of the Circle, all people had the potential capacity to be included into the political nation eventually. For example, John Edward Taylor made the following remarks about the people of Manchester in 1820:

I have only discharged what seemed to me a duty, to the great body of my industrious neighbours and fellow-countrype. The people are unjustly appreciated principally, because their character is imperfectly known. But I have no hesitation in stating it as my solemn

\textsuperscript{155} \textit{Manchester Guardian}, 1 November 1837.
conviction, that an individual of moderate political principles … would … feel himself compelled to decide, that no body of English peasantry is, for sobriety, good conduct, shrewdness, industry, and intelligence, to be compared to the mass of the *manufacturing population* which surrounds Manchester.¹⁵⁶

In this instance Taylor referred to the people as the general manufacturing population of Manchester. Taylor’s pamphlet was written only a year after the Peterloo Massacre, when he believed the people of Manchester had been treated unfairly and harshly by the local yeomanry. Though the people of Manchester were imperfectly appreciated, Taylor recognised that they had the potential to demonstrate their intelligence and capacity for rational thought, even if Manchester’s local authorities did not. He argued that not everyone across Britain’s various towns and villages demonstrated the same level of political conviction, intelligence and sobriety as the people of Manchester. Accordingly, Taylor thought that the people of Manchester were an example to be followed and emulated in other towns across Britain.

One of the ways the Circle’s members believed the people could demonstrate their capacity for ‘intelligence’ and ‘good conduct’, was by supporting measures and causes led by middle-class groups. Kahan has argued that nineteenth-century liberals believed that intelligence, life-experience and education were factors that determined one’s political capacity. He argued that it was the middle class who were felt to demonstrate these criteria for political capacity.¹⁵⁷ Whilst the members of the Circle did not go so far as to suggest that the working class should lead public opinion and drive political projects forward, they did believe that all people could potentially rally together and support various political projects. Speaking during a reform meeting held in January 1831, Richard Potter stated that Manchester was ‘the centre of a vast population’ and that ‘when such a people arise, as it were like one man, to state their dissatisfaction at the present state of the house of commons, I anticipate a beneficial result will

ensue’. In this instance, Potter understood the people to be the ‘vast population’ that resided in Manchester and not just the middle class present in this town. Potter’s idea of the people was one that predicted a future where everyone had the capacity to work together and achieve things as one general body. But it is also implied that the people of Manchester did not presently act together as a unified force, because such potential on the part of the majority of the population was still to be realised.

The belief in the potential to bring an entire people together into a larger and more amicable community was evident in the writings and speeches of other Circle members. Taylor, for example, preached the gospel of class conciliation and understanding. He lamented how ‘circumstances should have long conspired to interrupt the friendly and cordial feelings, which ought mutually to prevail between the labourers and those of the class above them’, thereby jeopardising the ‘free interchange of acts of kindness’ that existed between them. This was also a sentiment that was echoed in Taylor’s memorial service, when Reverend Robberds told this congregation that the ‘misunderstandings and differences of classes’ could be resolved by an appreciation for how ‘dependent’ each were to one another. In practice, Robberds argued, they all had the ‘same ultimate interests, such as employers and the employed, agriculturists and commercialists, rich and poor’. Free trade was one area in particular where members of the Circle agreed that the nation’s interests had to be harmonised. In a letter to J.B Smith, Prentice argued that Corn Law repeal would ensure that the ‘millions who were wretched are now comfortable’.

158 Manchester Times, 22 January 1831
159 Taylor, Notes and Observations, pp. 205-6.
161 Archibald Prentice to J.B Smith, 5 January 1852, J.B Smith papers Manchester Archives +, GB127.MS 923.S344, p. 76
class, the members of the Circle believed, beneficial social and political objectives for the majority of the people could be achieved.

The social commentator, J. Kay-Shuttleworth, noted that members of the Little Circle, particularly Richard Potter and John Shuttleworth, focused on bringing cordiality and organisation to the ‘overgrown villages’ so that they became ‘one city worthy of being the emporium of the cotton manufacturers and the metropolis of trade’.\textsuperscript{162} This was also a sentiment echoed in a public meeting held on 5 May 1825 to rally Manchester’s support for Catholic emancipation. Convening several days before the Catholic Relief Bill was ultimately rejected in Parliament on 17 May 1825, a lowly cotton spinner named Jonathan Hodgins took the stage to offer his opinion on this matter in a speech that Prentice suggested was ‘worth recording, as amongst the first delivered by a working man, taking his place amongst able speakers, who held high commercial rank in the community’.\textsuperscript{163} After his speech, members of the Circle including Shuttleworth, the Potters, Baxter and Prentice, applauded Hodgins for saying that he hoped the British people should ‘consult each other’s interests, and cultivate each other’s good will’ so that they could all ‘live together as one people’\.\textsuperscript{164}

Despite the fact that the members of the Circle believed the British people had the capacity to work together and act as one people, they did not consider the working class to be worthy of inclusion into the franchise. Instead, the Little Circle’s membership hoped to mobilise and direct the majority of people to follow a certain political course and support their various political objectives. In October 1831, during a public meeting held in the open air at Riding School in Manchester, to declare dissatisfaction with the recent rejection of the Reform Bill

\textsuperscript{163} Prentice, \textit{Sketches}, pp. 256-8.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid, pp. 257-8.
through parliament, John Shuttleworth described the population of Manchester’s conduct as exemplary. Despite the ‘anxious discussions that have taken place on the reform bill’, Shuttleworth noted that ‘the British people’ had been ‘characterised by a moral energy and intelligence’. In Shuttleworth’s estimation, the British people had justly appreciated ‘the immense value of the object for which they are contending’. Shuttleworth might have praised the conduct of the British people in the context of 1831, but he was also aware that thirty years previously, ‘the first reformers in Manchester’ had suffered the ‘ignorance and violence of the people’. 165

The members of the Circle accepted that the people were capable of exerting considerable influence, but they were also aware that they had historically been prone to instances and activities that highlighted their irrational, violent and disruptive outbursts. The people were a volatile group that could be catalysed into violent political action under certain circumstances. When a Reform Bill was rejected in the House of Lords in October 1831, the Manchester Times reflected that although they trusted the ‘good sense of the people’, if reform bills continued to be refused, nothing could prevent ‘acts of intimidation and violence’. 166 Although middle-class groups such as the Circle tried to marshal and direct the people, they also feared that they could be a law unto themselves and resort to violent actions.

But many working-class people in Manchester did not trust middle-class groups such as the Circle, and wanted to pursue their own political ambitions independently. Numerous labouring men for instance did not believe that there could be a consolidation and harmonisation of middle-class and working-class interests. Local working-class public figures such as Elijah

165 Manchester Times, 15 October 1831.
166 Ibid.
Dixon – who was seen by the members of the Little Circle as an over-zealous reformer and ‘radical’ personality – spoke against others in his community whom he believed did not share the same background and circumstances such as himself. Dixon declared that he believed a distinctive ‘sperrit of the age’ only existed in the ‘working class in and about Manchester’. Working-class radicals such Dixon placed a premium on the interests of ‘the working class in and about Manchester’. Although the members of the Circle had clear ideas on what they thought the political and social interests of their town and country were, they still wanted a harmonious society where middle-class and working-class people supported the same political initiatives. But because most people were considered to be far too ignorant of these issues, a smaller group had to secure these interests. The next section of this chapter explains that the members of the Little Circle believed a small, rational and bourgeois public was responsible for articulating and representing the interests of the people of Manchester.

The Public

Whereas the previous section argued that the Circle’s notion of ‘the people’ referred to a wide and diverse social base, this section argues that ‘the public’ was seen as a separate and select grouping of middle-class men. This bourgeois male public was thought best placed to represent what the members of the Circle perceived to be the will of the whole people – principally at public meetings and through the press. Circle members also believed that this public had a vital role to play in shaping, articulating and representing the interests of the people of Manchester. The members of the Circle considered themselves to be part of the small and elite public that they believed had the necessary skills and characteristics to scrutinise government and to represent and articulate the political and social interests of their entire town. As the Manchester

168 Ibid, pp. 163-4
Guardian observed, the ‘most virtuous, enlightened, and consistent portion of society’ were the ‘middle class’, and the ‘uneducated’ working class in their town should look at them for direction.¹⁶⁹

One of the key influences on this understanding of the public were the writings of Jeremy Bentham, who suggested that public opinion should be articulated and represented by a ‘Public Opinion Tribunal’. In his First Principles Preparatory to the Constitutional Code, first published in 1822, Bentham stated that the public opinion tribunal was a body of literate citizens who discussed and represented the interests of the people and held the government to account on behalf of the general population, most notably in the press.¹⁷⁰ He also explained that the public opinion tribunal was very similar to a jury composed of rational and intelligent people, who were dedicated to upholding the law and scrutinising legal arguments. A jury had the power to block ‘bad laws … and in particular upon all those in which the oligarchy by whom we are plundered and oppressed have a special sinister interest’.¹⁷¹ Bentham’s public opinion tribunal embodied a rational public body that was sorely needed to ameliorate the present British political system.

The way in which the members of the Circle thought about the formation of public opinion had important antecedents that traced back to the eighteenth century. Jürgen Habermas has suggested that the public sphere first emerged in Europe during the eighteenth century, and specifically in Britain. Habermas argued that this rational public sphere criticised political officials and attempted to influence political decisions in a new institutional context such as salons, coffee houses, literature and debating societies. This public sphere was never truly

¹⁶⁹ Manchester Guardian, 8 August 1829.
¹⁷¹ Bentham, First Principles, p. 393.
democratic as it failed to incorporate the working class, who did not have the capacity to apply reason to the discussions that ensued.\textsuperscript{172} Barker has noted that eighteenth-century public opinion can be thought of as a tribunal that was ‘based outside the political structures of the state’, and comprised of people who criticized those ‘in power’ by a body ‘who deemed themselves fit to be included within the boundaries of the political nation’.\textsuperscript{173} Habermas though has been criticised for his restrictive interpretation of the classical idea of the bourgeois public sphere. Geoff Eley has argued that ‘the public sphere makes more sense as the structural setting where cultural and ideological contest or negotiation among a variety of publics take place’, instead of interpreting it as ‘the spontaneous and class-specific achievement of the bourgeoisie in some sufficient sense’. Different and opposing publics ‘maneuvered for space’, argues Eley, where certain ‘publics’ such as women and the working class ‘may have been excluded altogether’.\textsuperscript{174}

Yet the conceptual understanding offered by Habermas, of the difference between the people and the public, helps shed new light on the way we interpret early nineteenth-century understandings of the distinctions between the role of the people and the public in the formation of public opinion. Barker has observed that ‘Quite who produced public opinion…was hotly debated throughout the period, and contemporaries could not agree concerning the identity of “the public”. For some it described those whose constitutional standing, education or wealth gave them a legitimate say in the nation’s affairs; for others, the term was synonymous with the mob’. She has further noted that the provincial press and the London press defined the


\textsuperscript{173} Barker, \textit{Newspapers, Politics and Public Opinion}, p. 3.

public in different ways. In the provinces for example the press considered the public to be a much narrower constituency.\textsuperscript{175}

The \textit{Manchester Guardian}, which as we saw in chapter one was the most widely read newspaper in Manchester in this period, viewed the public to be a narrow middle-class grouping. In 1830 the \textit{Manchester Guardian} reported, in the context of what it viewed as widespread working class and radical hysteria and political violence across the country, that the ‘mass of the middle ranks still look for progressive improvement in the institutions of their country, to the peaceable and constitutional influence of public opinion’.\textsuperscript{176} The \textit{Manchester Times} also recognised that in ‘matters relating to the interests of the public of Manchester the readers of the Times … may always rely on thorough independence. It will owe its establishment to the conviction of a great number of most respectable inhabitants’.\textsuperscript{177} Although the \textit{Times} viewed the public as being more inclusive than just the middle class, it recognised that its readers were mainly comprised of those who considered themselves to be ‘respectable’.

Clearly different newspapers catered for different audiences, and they broadcast different editorial stances on a range of different social and political issues. For example, while liberal newspapers such as the \textit{Manchester Times} and \textit{Manchester Guardian} supported issues such as Catholic emancipation, parliamentary reform and the repeal of the Corn Laws, the Tory controlled \textit{Manchester Courier} opposed these measures.\textsuperscript{178} It is possible to say that different newspaper readers would have presumably formed alternative publics in Manchester. Depending on what newspaper one read, a reader would be exposed to different ideas which would help shape different opinions. Those people who read the \textit{Manchester Guardian}, for


\textsuperscript{176} \textit{Manchester Guardian}, 25 December 1830.

\textsuperscript{177} \textit{Manchester Times}, 17 October 1828.

\textsuperscript{178} \textit{Manchester Guardian}, 15 March 1829.
instance, thus formed a different reading public to those who read the *Manchester Courier* or the *Poor Man’s Guardian*. The existence of alternative publics was also apparent in public meetings.\(^{179}\) Such meetings also provided the opportunity to demonstrate the ‘manifestation of public feeling’ by a particular body of residents.\(^{180}\)

Although different publics were present in Manchester during the early nineteenth century, there was a dominant middle-class and male public: a public to which the members of the Little Circle belonged. The existence of this public was most clearly demonstrated between 1821 and 1846 in indoor town meetings. Although the main analysis of such meetings comes in chapters three and four, it is worth noting here that middle-class public opinion in Manchester was decisively formulated in meetings located in local political buildings and institutions, rather than outside space. As a result, these forums can be viewed as crucial arenas for the production of public opinion within a Habermasian model. While those present at these meetings did not tend to characterise themselves as being middle class, speakers routinely celebrated the fact that they were attended by ‘gentlemen’ of the ‘highest respectability’ and ‘commercial’ reputation.\(^{181}\)

In Manchester, the indoor public meeting was a gendered political space through which a distinctively male and middle-class public gathered to deliberate and formulate their own

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\(^{180}\) *Manchester Times*, 18 August 1832.

\(^{181}\) *Manchester Guardian*, 7 May 1825; *Manchester Guardian*, 26 May 1827; *Manchester Times*, 1 January 1831; *Manchester Times*, 22 January 1831.
expression of local public opinion. Although there did not appear to be an official ruling banning women from these meetings, women were occluded from deliberations and had no role to play in the formulation of this expression of local bourgeois public opinion. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have described how the ‘marginality’ of women ‘was even more pronounced in the world of politics and civic life’. Middle-class men on the other hand ‘were able to use their enterprise, their business and professional acumen to make new claims for themselves to be public “somebodies”’. The presence of middle-class voluntary associations, societies, philanthropic and educational enterprises, coupled with the way these societies were run, ‘all contributed to the maintenance of existing divisions between men and women’.

More recent historical scholarship though has argued that the sharp divisions between public and private spheres were not that clear cut and were frequently transgressed. Alex Tyrrell for example has observed that British custom did not allow for the participation of women in public meetings. However, he has also noted that in the 1820s women were involved in auxiliary societies for the Anti-Slavery movement, whilst in the 1840s, alongside men, they attended public banquets and events organised by the Anti-Corn Law League. Matthew Cragoe has additionally demonstrated how women were involved in political activities such as canvassing. Combined with their role and ‘practical influence’ in electoral campaigns and their

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use of social networks to marshal political influence over their husbands’ political outlook, Cragoe has argued that the ‘vote was a family piece of property’.

The setting of the indoor public meeting has received little scrutiny from historians, particularly in relation to how we understood its relationship to notions of masculinity. Although chapter three will fully address the role and purpose of indoor deliberative assemblies in Manchester, my purpose here is to emphasise that these meetings were arenas where a select body comprised exclusively of men judged their own behaviour and conduct. In these meetings, audience members highlighted that they were only addressing audiences that were composed wholly by men. When addressing a meeting held in the Town Hall to consider the propriety of petitioning parliament for a reform of the representative system in January 1831, Richard Potter made it clear that he thought the meeting present was a masculine gathering by referring to the attendants as ‘Gentlemen’. The following September a meeting was called in the Manor Court Room to consider the propriety of petitioning the Lords the pass the Reform Bill. When John Shuttleworth began his speech, he addressed the attendants of the meeting as ‘Mr Boroughreeve and gentlemen’. Speakers such as Potter and Shuttleworth acknowledged that indoor public meetings were masculine forums, composed solely of ‘gentlemen’ such as themselves. Unlike contemporaneous Anti-Slavery auxiliary societies, or Anti-Corn Law dinners, indoor public meetings were an example of extra-parliamentary political activity in Manchester, which deliberately sought to showcase the political capacity of middle-class men.

186 Manchester Times, 22 January 1831.
187 Manchester Times, 24 September 1831.
As chapter three will show, the indoor public meeting was a forum through which middle-class men intended to meet and deliberate with one another in a cordial and deliberative manner. These meetings were defined by procedures and conventions that placed a premium on good conduct. John Tosh has argued that by the late nineteenth century the eighteenth-century idea of the ‘polite gentleman’ gave way to ideas centred around ‘manliness’, which was defined by ruggedness and individuality.\(^{188}\) Furthermore, Jon Lawrence has observed that during elections after 1832, candidates were expected to ‘display “manly” courage and forbearance when faced by the indignities of a popular election. This meant displaying stoical rather than the martial face of nineteenth-century “masculinity” – candidates were expected to grin and bear it’. He further added that ideas ‘of “manly” virtue were central to nineteenth-century politics, not least through the near ubiquitous rhetoric celebrating candidates’ supposed “manly independence”’.\(^{189}\)

In the context of the parliamentary debates of the late 1820s and 1830s in Manchester though, the indoor deliberative assembly exhibited more clearly the qualities of gentlemanly conduct. Ben Griffin has noted that ‘the term “gentleman” collapses any artificial division between class and gender: It was a form of masculinity to which most members of the upper and middle classes aspired’.\(^{190}\) In Manchester, men were expected to allow one another to speak without interruption, and that cordiality and respect remain paramount through the whole proceedings of the meeting. When a shoemaker called Mr Gilchrist jumped onto the table in front of the chairman, Richard Potter, to lay a claim for universal suffrage at a public meeting to discuss proposed changes to voting qualifications for the franchise in 1831, he was widely condemned

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by the assembly. The *Manchester Times* described how the meeting was ‘disgusted at this apparently intended insult to the chairman’ and consequently would not allow him to speak.¹⁹¹ Indoor deliberative assemblies were not forums where speakers were expected to tolerate abuse and demonstrate their capacity to withstand public attacks from audience members.

The men who organised and attended these meetings wanted to highlight their respectability and gentlemanly conduct. Mark Philips, the future MP for Manchester and ally of the Little Circle, said during a public meeting to ‘express approbation’ towards the conduct of the ministry for their proposed plans to extend the franchise, that he was ‘relieved by the satisfaction I witness animating the countenance of those around me’ during this ‘interesting occasion’.¹⁹² Circle member, John Shuttleworth, stated in a public meeting held in September 1831 to petition the House of Lords to pass the Reform Bill, that the conduct of the present assembly was an example of good gentlemanly conduct and decorum. Shuttleworth proclaimed that the ‘palpable evidence afforded by the appearance and conduct of this great meeting…are declarations of the sentiments that prevail on the subject in this town’.¹⁹³ Indoor public meetings did not share the same virtues of masculinity as other political forums and activities in the mid and late nineteenth century. The members of the Circle and their political allies utilised the space of the indoor public meeting to demonstrate their own idea of bourgeois and masculine values, which placed a premium on cordiality and rational and deliberative discussion. The site of the indoor public meeting was a crucial space that helped construct a clear expression of a masculine and middle-class social and political identity in Manchester.

¹⁹¹ *Manchester Times*, 2 July 1831.
¹⁹² *Manchester Times*, 12 March 1831.
¹⁹³ *Manchester Times*, 24 September 1831.
As we shall see more fully in chapter 3, the complexion of these meetings was also overwhelmingly middle class and their format tended to exclude the working class deliberately. This was necessary because most people in Manchester were thought by members of the middle class, including those of the Little Circle, to be poorly educated and not equipped with the intelligence and understanding needed to defend their community’s political interests. For example, in a speech during a public meeting to address petitioning parliament to repeal the Corn Laws, Richard Potter stated that he believed the people displayed ‘gross ignorance’ towards this issue.\textsuperscript{194} Prentice admitted that there were only a ‘few’ who expressed their voice against the corn monopoly, and that for the most part opposition ‘found feeble utterance’.\textsuperscript{195} Not only did the members of the Circle thus feel that they had to ignore the will of the people at certain points, they also believed that the people generally did not fully grasp the real political issues of the day. Instead it was thought that a self-styled rational middle-class public, of which the members of the Circle formed a part, did understand that Catholic emancipation and the Corn Laws were critical issues that had to be supported.

This was necessary because most people in Manchester were thought by members of the middle class, including those of the Little Circle, to be poorly educated and not equipped with the intelligence and understanding needed to defend their community’s political interests. For example, in a speech during a public meeting to address petitioning parliament to repeal the Corn Laws, Richard Potter stated that he believed the people displayed ‘gross ignorance’ towards this issue.\textsuperscript{196} Prentice admitted that there were only a ‘few’ who expressed their voice against the corn monopoly, and that for the most part opposition ‘found feeble utterance’.\textsuperscript{197} Not only did the members of the Circle thus feel that they had to ignore the will of the people

\textsuperscript{194} Manchester Guardian, 7 July 1827.  
\textsuperscript{195} Prentice, Sketches, p. 296.  
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\textsuperscript{197} Prentice, Sketches, p. 296.
at certain points, they also believed that the people generally did not fully grasp the real political issues of the day. Instead it was thought that a self-styled rational middle-class public, of which the members of the Circle formed a part, did understand that Catholic emancipation and the Corn Laws were critical issues that had to be supported.

Additionally, the Circle’s members suspected that the majority of people paid little attention to political or legal details. Thus the extension of the franchise to all people opened up the possibility that the majority, whom the Circle claimed had little political understanding, would be able to unfairly influence political proceedings. The *Manchester Guardian* suggested that the ‘balance of ranks and classes would be utterly extinguished in the overwhelming votes of that part of the population’ that was ‘least qualified to judge for the remainder, but which, taken individually, have the least interest in legislation’.\(^{198}\) The middle-class public of which the members of the Circle were part, however, took pride in the fact that they had a superior understanding of the law and the political interests of their town and country. Taylor, for example, complained that the masses had demonstrated a lack of understanding and faith in the law during the events of Peterloo. Whilst he conceded that the people technically had a ‘right to carry arms’, they did not have the right to orchestrate an instance of organised violence which went against the spirit of the ‘law’.\(^{199}\)

Taylor was clearly sympathetic to the victims of Peterloo and condemned the authorities; however, his general point was that the general population, specifically the poor, continued to ‘err through ignorance’, and failed to understand that the law was the only true guarantor of their liberty. He also lamented the fact that the ‘labouring classes’, in response to the authorities

\(^{198}\) *Manchester Guardian*, 20 December 1837.

\(^{199}\) Taylor, *Notes and Observations*, p. 197.
unwarranted aggression, reverted back to a mode of ‘self-defence’ rather than use the law. Instead of committing themselves to the ‘protection of the law’, Taylor believed that people preferred to take measures into their own hands. From the perspective of the members of the Circle, political change had to be secured through deliberative and legal measures and the rational reform of existing political institutions: specifically, a reformed parliamentary system.200

Parliamentary Reform

This section shows that the purpose of parliamentary reform, in the minds of the members of the Circle, was to offer a route for people such as themselves into the nation’s formal political processes: namely, the right to vote and the ability to stand for election as a Member of Parliament. The Circle’s members, fundamentally, believed that parliamentary reform should act as a mechanism to allow a moderate increase to the franchise: so that it incorporated self-styled rational and intelligent middle-class men such as themselves. Traditionally, historians have argued that the Reform Act was designed in the main part to enfranchise and represent the middle class across Britain.201 More recently though scholars have suggested that the 1832 Reform Act encouraged the development of partisanship rather than the enfranchisement of the middle class.202 Historians are less clear however about the ways in which middle-class groups, such as the members of the Circle, perceived and understood parliamentary reform during this

200 Ibid, p. 194.
period. By examining the political ideas of the members of the Circle, this section will help us to understand how this group of middle-class reformers understood the Reform Bill.

The members of the Circle generally supported the three reform bills that were put through parliament during the 1830s. Members of the Circle vociferously supported Lord John Russell’s initial proposal for parliamentary reform. Aside from plans to remove delinquent boroughs such as East Retford and Penryn, replacing them with previously unrepresented constituencies such as Manchester, the members of the Circle supported the blanket £10 borough householder qualification. This qualification enfranchised any man who lived in a property that paid annual rents of £10 a year or more. During a meeting held in 1827 that discussed a proposal to grant Manchester parliamentary representation, two members of the circle (Taylor and John Shuttleworth) proposed a motion to request that Parliament consider an assessment that would grant the vote to be specifically set at £15 for annual ratepayers in their Borough. When this proposal was changed to £10 in 1831, the members of the Circle supported the reform bill through its various iterations, even though the three reform bills that were discussed in parliament bore little resemblance to one another. In fact, the only time they presented an objection was during the reading of the second reform Bill, which excluded persons who paid their rent more frequently than once a year because this was at considerable ‘variance with the principles of the bill originally introduced by Lord John Russell’. Ultimately, this alteration was rejected and an alternative bill was introduced that returned the vote in the boroughs to tenants who paid an annual rental of £10 or more regardless of the frequency with which they paid their rents.

203 Borough Reeve’s records relating to public meetings in Manchester, Manchester Archives+, M91/33/1 f.268, 20 December 1827.
205 Manchester Times, 2 July 1831.
From the Circle’s perspective, parliamentary reform was fundamentally about removing corruption and redistributing political power from the aristocracy, and towards a rational and well-educated public that could best represent the interests of the people. During a speech held on the issue of parliamentary reform in January 1831, Shuttleworth said that it should be a measure designed for the ‘deliverance of the people from the aristocracy’. Reform from the Circle’s perspective was about returning power to the people by removing corrupt boroughs and offering it to previously unrepresented towns such as Manchester. Parliamentary reform also entailed a moderate increase to the franchise, so that men of principle and intellect could elect their representatives, who could thereafter represent the will of the people of Manchester. Yet the members of the Circle did not go into a significant amount of detail regarding their understanding of parliamentary reform. Indeed, the Circle’s members did not talk extensively about which boroughs should be enfranchised, and which should lose their MP. What they did realise however was that parliamentary reform should re-evaluate the old political map of their country, which based voting distribution on old census figures. As Richard Potter said in a town hall meeting held in January 1831, it was unfair that 25 boroughs across Britain controlled 50 members, when these individuals were only returned by a few voters.

Boyd Hilton has also argued that the Reform Act was an attempt to standardize a complicated political system and body politic. For the members of the Circle, parliamentary reform was also about re-dressing imbalances in their nation’s political and representative system. Members of the Little Circle maintained that ‘Delinquent’ boroughs such as Penryn and East Retford supported the ‘evil’ system that offered an ‘unduly large share of political power’ to the hands of ‘the landed interest’, via control of rotten or nomination boroughs and the

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206 *Manchester Times*, 21 January 1831.
207 Ibid.
dominance of great landowners in the counties. This system perpetuated a political situation which gave power and influence to aristocrats who could simply buy public office, rather than achieve their political position through merit. Challenging aristocratic influence remained a consistent part of the Little Circle’s assessment of the parliamentary reform initiative for the next decade. During a Manchester ‘Reform Meeting’, that occurred on Thursday 20 January 1831, several members of the Circle – including Richard and Thomas Potter, Baxter, Shuttleworth, Harvey and Prentice – sought specific measures to prevent any unfair aristocratic influence on elections. Speaking first, Richard Potter declared that the unreformed political system was ‘corrupting the members of the house of commons’ because too much power was invested in the aristocracy. ‘Patrons’ controlled rotten boroughs, county seats and with them the Members of Parliament they nominated to represent these constituencies. Should that member ‘go against … the will of the patron’, Potter noted, he was ‘sure to suffer’.

Although this chapter has argued that the members of the Circle distanced themselves from radicalism, some of their ideas about subverting aristocratic rule were partly influenced by radical thinkers such as William Cobbett. In a meeting that discussed the objectives of reform – and before the formal introduction of the Whig government’s reform scheme – Shuttleworth commented that any Bill should offer ‘deliverance of people from the aristocracy’, and a chance to subvert ‘settled interests’. Specifically, Shuttleworth noted that the aristocracy’s influence encouraged Parliament to waste money on the army and navy, to continue the Corn Laws, to keep ‘abominations of our system of law’ from being addressed and also providing a licence for public officials to ‘indulge’ themselves in ‘extravagance’. By ensuring that members were returned who had ‘no interest in misgovernment’, the interests of the ‘whole community’ could

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210 *Manchester Times*, 22 January 1831.
be secured.\textsuperscript{211} Shuttleworth’s assessment of the purpose of reform echoed Cobbett’s criticisms of ‘Old Corruption’ in which Cobbett noted that a parasitical political system was created by the elites in Britain, at the expense of the British people.\textsuperscript{212} Insofar as the members of the Circle criticised the radicals for their tactics and over-zealous determination to extend the franchise to all free males in Britain, they did share an understanding that reform should target aristocratic extravagance and political abuses. Indeed, Whigs, radicals and reformers alike argued that the pre-1832 electoral system was unrepresentative, and did not hold the government to account for excessive taxation and corruption. In a letter to John Edward Taylor, Richard Potter described how the years preceding the 1832 Reform Act were ‘critical’ and rife with government ‘misrule’.\textsuperscript{213}

Parliamentary reform was also about offering middle-class men such as the members of the Circle an opportunity to vote and elect their own chosen representatives. It was also about integrating bourgeois men such as themselves into the political nation. Richard Potter demanded in a public meeting in 1831, proposing a petition to support parliamentary reform, that any future Bill should put ‘men of talent’ and ‘principles first’.\textsuperscript{214} The Reform Bill was seen by the Circle as a measure that allowed a small and middle-class political elite to safeguard the interests of the majority by formally incorporating them into the franchise. Ideas of ‘upholding justice’ and combating corruption were attached to the Whig idea of having an ‘active and serious aristocratic leadership, rooted in the local community’.\textsuperscript{215} Parry has also argued that the fundamental aim of the Reform Act was to restore the executive power of

\textsuperscript{211} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{214} \textit{Manchester Times}, 22 January 1831.
Parliament by being able ‘to locate, and respond equitably to, social tensions, unrest, and grievances, and so secure popular confidence in more active, disciplinary rule’. Additionally, he argued that ‘Pressure from an aroused electorate would lead MPs to develop “character”, “kindness and good offices” in order to retain their influence’.

The members of the Circle wanted parliamentary reform that offered intelligent and talented middle-class men such as themselves a decisive leadership role in their community and that gave them a legitimate say in determining their own political future.

In order to guarantee their own political future, and in line with their beliefs about the importance of a rational and reasoning public, MPs were chosen who could represent their town’s interests. Moreover, the members of the Circle believed the Reform Act should only offer a moderate increase to the franchise. To an extent the 1832 Reform Act was a measure that was designed to preserve the interests of the majority; however, the bulk of the Circle’s membership never believed it was a political measure that should enfranchise everyone. Archibald Prentice was the only member of the Circle who believed that there should be a more far-reaching increase to the franchise. Prentice was more sympathetic to the radical idea that the franchise should be extended as far as possible. Whereas the majority of the members of the Circle were wealthy and had commercial success, Prentice was a relatively poor newspaper editor. His ideas about the franchise were thus arguably shaped by his own circumstances and financial standing. Prentice differed from the rest of the circle though, in the sense that he was far more optimistic about the immediate intellectual abilities of the British people. Accordingly, Prentice questioned any ‘reformer’ who did not want to see ‘an extension of the elective suffrage’.

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216 Parry, *Rise and Fall of Liberal Government*, p. 87.
217 *Manchester Times*, 22 January 1831.
Radicals had a different understanding of the expectations of parliamentary reform when compared to the majority of the members of the Circle, not least as they expected immediate and wholesale changes that drastically altered the parliamentary system. On the whole, the members of the Circle believed in piecemeal changes. As we have already seen in this section, members of the Circle saw parliamentary reform as a tool that was primarily designed to undermine an aristocratic hold over politics in Britain and allow middle-class men such as themselves a more prominent role in choosing their representatives in Parliament. While Prentice was the only Circle member who sympathised with radical demands that included annual parliaments, votes by ballot and universal suffrage, he also understood that the reform proposals were not a ‘perfect and final measure’.218 There were lukewarm responses to the parliamentary reform proposals amongst radicals, because they believed it denied them a fair and equal access to the vote. In January 1831, two months before the first reading of the Reform Bill in the House of Commons, the radical Elijah Dixon commented in a public meeting that the reform proposals denied him the ‘same rights and privileges’ as others in Manchester.219 Several months later, after a failed second attempt to pass the Reform Bill through the House of Lords, another working-class radical, William Ashmore, criticised the Bill in a public meeting on the grounds that it did not go far enough for men like him. Ashmore stated that the reform proposals ‘gave him nothing’ and that he believed he had been ‘robbed’. Although he said that he was not opposed to any bill, he would not support it by signing his name to a petition.220

In 1831 and 1832 the various reform proposals offered middle-class men such as the members of the Circle an opportunity to make their voices heard in Westminster. But parliamentary

218 Prentice, Sketches, p. 394.
219 Manchester Times, 23 January 1831.
220 Manchester Times, 24 September 1831; Prentice, Sketches, p. 395.
reform was seen by them as more than just a measure that was put in place to enfranchise men such as themselves. Instead, reform was part of a much larger political project that was designed to integrate a rational and reasoning public who had the capacity to understand and interpret the political and social issues of the day. In the next section of this chapter, we shall see how the members of the Circle believed that a reformed parliamentary system was only as efficient and effective as the public who engaged with it. Without an educated and rational public, a reformed parliamentary system would be less effective and sensitive to the true needs of the people.

**Reform and education**

For the members of the Little Circle, reform was a holistic concept that referred to the moral and rational improvement of both the political system as well as the improvement of the moral character and minds of the population. Historians have not always combined ideas surrounding parliamentary reform with those relating to those of moral and spiritual reform. Joanna Innes has argued that the word ‘reform’ was used as a prefatory adjective to denote projects such as ‘prison reform’, ‘factory reform’ and ‘financial reform’. Innes has also observed that the term ‘Reformer’ was a ‘convenient umbrella title for a supporter’ of the ministry led by Earl Grey. It was a title that many MPs ‘presented themselves to the electorate’ and remained current for those who ‘chose to label themselves’ this way through the 1830s.221 Derek Beales has additionally argued that the word ‘reform’ was used specifically within the context of parliamentary reform.222 Other historians have examined reform in relation to middle-class philanthropic exercises geared towards improving the moral and spiritual conduct of the population.

221 J. Innes, *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780-1830* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 93-5
working class. But education and parliamentary reform went hand-in-hand for the members of the Circle. They believed that an efficient and productive parliamentary system required the input of a population who could tackle and understand political issues in a rational and deliberative manner.

As we saw in chapter one, the members of the Circle were dedicated to ideas of self-improvement and the education of the labouring class. Education was seen as a tool that helped shape and nurture the development of people who could one day form a part of the political nation. In an article from the *Manchester Times*, it was suggested that ‘The purposed extension of the elective franchise and the probability of further concessions to the popular voice, are great additional arguments for promoting the education of the people. To be able rightly to exercise the valuable privileges they are about to acquire, they ought to be well instructed in their duties as men, and as citizens’. In order to perform the function of a diligent and thoughtful citizen, one had to be politically astute and well-versed in the political issues of the day. In Prentice’s opinion, a ‘qualification of intelligence’ was necessary to be given the vote, and that this was defined by a person’s capacity to ‘read the proceedings of his representative’ and ‘sign his name to a petition’.

To a certain extent the ability to sign one’s name to a petition and read the proceedings of a representative were relatively modest expectations that many people could aspire to attain. But

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224 *Manchester Times*, 18 June 1831.

225 *Manchester Times*, 5 October 1839.
as we have already seen in section two of this chapter, when discussing the Circle’s understanding of the public, the majority of the Circle’s members did not think all people really understood their true needs and interests. Most of the Circle’s membership did not believe that simply signing one’s name to a petition and reading the proceedings of the representatives were valid qualifications for the vote. Rather, a citizen had to be sensitive to, and understand, what he was doing when signing his name to a petition, and what his representatives had discussed. The electorate also had to be objective and understand the interests of other groups in society. Writing shortly after Catholic emancipation was passed, in the teeth of major popular opposition in 1829, Taylor wrote in the *Manchester Guardian* that the bulk of ‘labouring classes are still too much with prejudices’. They were ‘too much the slaves of gross appetite’ and ‘entirely subject to the influence of their employers’. Although the *Manchester Guardian* did at least contend that the people in Britain were more educated than any other country, it also conceded that many were still ‘too little versed in political affairs’ to be able to form a ‘just opinion respecting the true interests of the country’. If the people had been granted the right to vote in 1829, Taylor argued, it would have been unlikely that measures such as Catholic emancipation would have been brought to the forefront of the political debate.\(^{226}\)

On the whole, the members of the Circle believed radicals did not engage with new ideas properly and instead tackled their political and social arguments in an irrational and disruptive fashion. Members of the Circle understood the word ‘radical’ to be a pejorative term that referred to an individual or group that was characterised by a high degree of irrationality and a desire to subvert the political order through agitation and possible revolution. ‘Radical’ according to Absalom Watkin referred to the uneducated, violent, drunk and noisy element of the working population, who demanded far-reaching changes to the British political system.

\(^{226}\) *Manchester Guardian*, 8 August 1829.
Phrases such as ‘hot headed radical’ were utilised by Watkin to characterise individuals who flew into tempers and chose not to debate reasonably with others. Watkin believed radicalism was the antithesis of sober-minded thinking. In fact, Watkin referred to nearby Middleton as being distinguished for its ‘radicalism’ in the same way he chose to characterise it as a town of drunks and troublemakers. Whereas the members of the Circle saw themselves as part of a body of middle-class reformers who were characterised as being ‘sober’ and of ‘good conduct’, the ‘radical’ was portrayed as an unthinking drunk, who used violence and disruption to make his point. Such people were unworthy of being included in the franchise because they could not contribute to a reasoned and rational debate that was sensitive to the interests of other groups.

Insofar as the Circle thought that they could be educated out of their ignorance, they tended to complain about and criticise the current conduct of the working class in their town. According to the Circle’s members, the general population of the working class in Manchester did not conform to the Circle’s standards concerning either intellect or morals. Drink and gambling were identified by the Circle as two vices that stunted the intellectual and cultural development of their fellow townsmen. In their opinion, such vices might potentially encumber a reformed parliamentary system, and lead to further episodes of political misrule. Yet in a letter to Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, Thomas Potter offered to show him a more ‘favourable’ image of the working class in Manchester when he visited in 1830 in order to confront these representations. While Potter did not deny that he had seen ‘the darker side’ of the working

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227 Watkin, Diary, p. 162.
228 Ibid, p. 83.
229 Ibid, p. 162.
class in his town, he wanted to assure the Duke that there was also a more encouraging impression. Potter did not go so far as to say that the entire working-class population in Manchester had been misunderstood, but he did contend that there were certain elements in his town that demonstrated that they might have the capacity to be included into a future franchise.

Most people in Manchester, and British society as a whole, did not meet the standards of the Circle’s understanding of rationality. But they also believed that everyone could develop their intellects and moral standing, and consequently be eligible to vote in future. In a meeting held in October 1835 in the York Room in Manchester to propose the construction of a newsroom for the Athenaeum, Richard Potter seconded a motion put forward by a Robert Aicholson which stated that the purpose of the Athenaeum was to promote the cause of ‘intellectual and moral improvement’. The relationship, for instance, between a lack of education and crime was of particular concern for the members of the Circle. Richard Potter, during a meeting asking for a national system of education in 1833, stated that education ‘tends to prevent poverty and crime’. It was, he said, the ‘principal means by which existing evils can be checked, and even worse evils averted’. Education was a tool that not only helped a person achieve a heightened sense of intelligence and understanding, but it also fostered the development of a more finely tuned moral character.

Members of the Circle believed strongly in the possibility of the creation of a rational and intelligent population regardless of class. After the Mechanics Institute was founded in Manchester in 1825 to offer the working class lectures on various scientific topics as well as

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231 Letter from T. Potter to A. Wellesley, first Duke of Wellington, Offers to show the Duke the True Condition of Manchester, 14 September 1830, Duke of Wellington Papers, Southampton University Archive, WP1/1141/11.
232 Projected Newsroom and Literary and Scientific Institution Manchester October 1833 to December 1839, Manchester Archives+, GB127. M2 1/1, M2 1/1, p. 2.
233 John Shuttleworth Scrapbook, Manchester Archives+, GB127.BR f 324.942733 S3, Volume 5, p. 4.
234 Manchester Times, 23 February 1833.
access to newspapers in its reading room, Brotherton, Shuttleworth and Richard Potter all sat on the executive committee in the 1820s and 1830s, whilst Baxter, Harvey and Taylor regularly gave talks for the institution. Gregory Vargo has noted that Whig and middle-class ‘philanthropists hoped Mechanics’ Institutes … would foster a culture of respectability and invest the working classes in the emerging industrial order by promoting the virtues of thrift, sobriety, and diligence’. Schools were also established by the members of the Circle and their fellow Unitarian political colleagues. Thomas Potter helped financed the creation of a day school for both boys and girls in Irlam at his own expense. Colloquially known as ‘Lady Potter’s school’ by locals, probably due to the fact that it made a concerted attempt to educate local working-class girls as well as boys, it had an attendance that exceeded seventy pupils. Brotherton also used his own wealth to patronise a library.

The Sunday school movement was also praised by members of the Circle for giving an elementary education to poor children, as well as inculcating certain moral values. Prentice believed Sunday schools had the power to ‘awaken powers of thought’ in their pupils. ‘With the single undeviating purpose of promoting the eternal welfare of their pupils’, he added, ‘they were preparing them for the fit discharge of their social and political duties’. Prentice ultimately praised the teachers because he felt that they ‘were creating THOUGHT amongst the hitherto unthinking masses’. Such was the effectiveness of this scheme that it appeared to one letter writer in the Manchester Times as if the ‘children teach themselves’.

235 Manchester Gazette, 10 April 1929.
237 Manchester Courier, 29 March 1845.
239 Watkin, Diary, p. 153; Prentice, Sketches, pp. 116-17.
241 Manchester Times, 17 January 1829.
To make an effective contribution to a reformed parliamentary system, one first had to apply himself and make the effort to learn about society and its issues. Watkin for example declared that in order to ‘know the worth of time, employ one hour’. Too many people in his estimation rushed forward and demanded immediate changes. He further suggested that those people who ‘know little, are anxious to reform everything’. Additionally, the *Manchester Guardian* lamented that the paper deplored ‘extreme changes’ for they had the ‘danger to the maintenance of public order’. The members of the Circle recognised that the people of Manchester had the potential to become rational, deliberative and law-abiding citizens who could fully immerse themselves in the political processes of their town and country. Although the members of the Circle did not think the vast population of Manchester should be enfranchised or form part of the public, they believed everyone was in theory capable of intellectual and moral improvement. Reform was part of a much larger project for the members of the Circle. Altering the political system made critical changes to the complexion and distribution of the franchise. However, it did not impact upon the way the population conducted themselves and engaged with political and social issues. The members of the Circle wanted to educate the people so that a platform could be established that allowed for a parliamentary system to mature and gradually incorporate a larger share of the people.

**Conclusion**

The members of the Circle were part of a visible cohort of like-minded bourgeois male public in Manchester who were highly influential in political debates surrounding issues such as parliamentary reform, religious toleration and free trade. Nevertheless, this chapter has shown that the ways in which the members of the Circle understood the people, the public and reform

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242 Watkin, *Diary*, p. 33 [Emphasis Watkin’s].
underscored a different dynamic to the way historians have traditionally understood the formation of ‘liberal’ ideas and opinions during the early nineteenth century. From the perspective of the members of the Circle, the people had to be represented – at least in the immediate term – by a distinctly middle-class and rational public, of which they themselves were members. There was thus a critical conceptual distinction between the Circle’s idea of the people and the public. Most people were thought to be not ready, intelligent or well-versed enough politically to contribute to political discussions in Manchester and to help formulate and express public opinion. For this reason, the members of the Circle did not want to pursue parliamentary reform in terms of extending the franchise to universal male suffrage. Although Prentice was the most sympathetic member amongst the Circle towards the idea of universal male suffrage, he still demanded that a qualification of intelligence – the ability to sign one’s name to a petition and read the proceedings of ministers – was needed in order to be granted the vote. But in general the Little Circle believed that it was preferable to have a small bourgeois public such as themselves exercising political rights, as they alone could approach this important role with objectivity and rationality.

Though the members of the Circle could envisage an expanded franchise in the future, this would need to be restricted to those individuals who had dedicated their time and effort to self-improvement. The Circle’s idea of parliamentary reform was intimately connected to ideas of intellectual and moral improvement, and its members believed that an electorate devoid of intelligence and moral standing had the potential to hinder a reformed parliamentary system because it would make irrational and potentially corrupt decisions. Importantly, the members of the Circle did not think that society should stagnate and that it was the duty of everyone to make a concerted effort to enrich their own intellectual and moral outlooks and that of others. Mancunian liberals, such as the members of the Circle, accordingly dedicated a significant
amount of their time to promoting education, both for bourgeois men such as themselves, but also for the working class in their town so that they too could become more fully immersed and integrated into the political nation.

Liberals in Manchester, like the Little Circle, were defined by the way that they imagined and interpreted the scope and role of the public. In chapter three, we shall see how the members of the Circle and their middle-class allies in Manchester attempted to utilise indoor public meetings as a means to formulate and broadcast the considered and deliberative opinions of a rational public: of which they formed a part. But as chapter four will demonstrate, the public became an increasingly flexible concept as political life in Manchester underwent considerable change following the passage of the 1832 Reform Bill. As an increasingly larger share of the town’s population involved themselves in political activities, the members of the Circle were forced to modify their own tactics, if not their underlying beliefs about who should be able to influence and shape public opinion.
Chapter 3: Deliberative assemblies: the setting for the formation of middle-class public opinion in Manchester between 1812 to 1832

After visiting Britain in the early 1830s, the American Presbyterian missionary, Calvin Colton, commented that ‘deliberative assemblies are the habit of the nation’, which was also a view shared by Alexis de Tocqueville.¹ As we shall see in this chapter, ‘deliberative assembly’ was a term the members of the Little Circle used to describe the indoor meetings they attended and organised between 1812 and 1832. This period encompasses the years when the Circle first became politically active in the public life of Manchester and in which they developed a distinctive style of indoor political meeting, facilitated by local institutions, to represent public opinion. These meetings were spaces that helped to represent and define the political opinions and interests of a select, bourgeois and male public in Manchester.

In the decade leading up to passage of the 1832 Reform Act, the indoor deliberative assembly was instrumental in defining the Circle’s brand of middle-class extra-parliamentary political action. As such, this chapter will provide a different interpretation of how the middle class in Manchester understood their capacity to shape and mobilise public opinion. Historians such as Simon Gunn and Alan Kidd have shown how the middle class in Manchester made a visible impact on their town through material improvements, and voluntary associationism, as well as through the political arena.² By focusing on these deliberative assemblies, this chapter will add another dimension to the historiography of early nineteenth-century popular politics. The indoor deliberative assembly was a key setting where the members of the Little Circle believed a literate, rational thinking and bourgeois public could cohere to articulate and formalise public opinion.

opinion. Chapter 3 develops the argument made in chapter 2, which highlighted the distinctive way in which the Circle imagined and interpreted the role of the ‘people’ in the political process, both at the local and national level. While that chapter focused on the ideas of the Circle, this chapter focuses on how these ideas were worked out in reality and examines their political practice. This chapter explains that the medium of the indoor deliberative meeting was the mechanism through which the Circle’s concept of a small and reasoning bourgeois public could be realised to formulate expressions of public opinion. This chapter deepens our understanding of popular politics by showing how a distinct, small, male and middle-class public in Manchester developed their political practice, and used this to differentiate themselves from the methods deployed by working-class radicals in their town.

Building on from chapter 2, I shall demonstrate how the Little Circle’s understanding of a bourgeois public bore similarities with both Jeremy Bentham’s notion of the Public Opinion Tribunal and Jürgen Habermas’s idea of a rational and literate ‘public sphere’. The role of early nineteenth-century indoor public meetings – legally and procedurally defined by their convening by local officials – in political culture have been addressed by Robin Handley, Iorwerth Prorthero and, more recently, by Janette Martin. Handley observed that these meetings were considered to be a ‘constitutional right’ and that they helped form ‘an expression of a town’s collective opinion’.

However, while this study will demonstrate that the Little Circle believed their public meetings represented the town’s collective opinion, in reality they

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understood that they only represented the opinions of a select, rational and bourgeois public acting in the name of the wider community.

Unlike mass platform radicals, the Little Circle did not seek to disturb the deliberative processes of Parliament, or incite popular agitation. Instead, the Circle used deliberative assemblies to criticise Tory governments and after 1830, when the Whig ministry led by Earl Grey was proposing parliamentary reform, meetings were organised in favour of ministers. These meetings were opportunities to collect and express public opinion in an open setting appropriate for reasoned public debate. Rather than establishing new spaces or places for debate, the Circle preferred to work through existing local institutions. From the Circle’s perspective, political change could best be brought about within a ‘public opinion tribunal’ that co-operated with the various local institutions and offices in Manchester. When it suited them, the Circle held indoor meetings convened under the authority of a local official. However, as practical politicians, the Circle were more than prepared to criticise the same officials and institutions when they disagreed with them, or when they appeared to act contrary to the Circle’s concept of the public interest.

Historians of popular politics have long demonstrated the importance of the mass platform in early nineteenth-century radicalism. However, this historiographical focus has meant that scholars have overlooked the ambivalent relationship other reformers had with public meetings and alternative forms of assembly that were characterised by their procedural and legalistic

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qualities rather than size. Katrina Navickas has analysed the use and symbolism of space in radical protest movements in the 1820s and 1830s. Navickas has observed that in this period, radicals and other groups fought to reclaim old and new spaces. These spaces, which were frequently outdoors, were symbolically important to working-class protestors as political outsiders. By holding meetings outdoors and especially beyond the jurisdiction of town boundaries, radicals provocatively challenged the local authority. These extra-parliamentary movements were defined by their ability to attract large crowds and audiences, as well as their reputation to ‘summon up the spectre of uncontrollable popular fury’. By contrast, the Little Circle were defined by the way they sought to work through their town’s local political traditions and institutions to mobilise a smaller, select public that claimed to represent the wider community.

The main body of source material for this chapter is newspapers. Historians have repeatedly demonstrated how instrumental newspapers were in representing, listening to, and shaping public opinion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The *Manchester Times*, edited by Archibald Prentice, adopted a strong editorial line in favour of parliamentary reform, and proposed reform tantamount to complete male suffrage, while the *Manchester Guardian*

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argued for small amendments to the representative system so that it encompassed more of the ‘intelligence’ of the nation. Their main Tory rival, the *Manchester Courier*, opposed reforms such as Catholic emancipation, the repeal of the Corn Laws and parliamentary reform.\(^{10}\) Despite the flourishing of a political press in Manchester and elsewhere, John Edward Taylor (editor of the *Manchester Guardian*) felt that newspapers could not accurately express public opinion. He questioned whether ‘public opinion’ could ever be effectively ‘embodied by the press’. Although his paper offered ‘spirited’ and ‘intelligent’ commentary on public events, he doubted whether the *Manchester Guardian* had an ‘affirmative’ or ‘negative’ impact on these important political questions.\(^{11}\) Yet Taylor recognised that the press had the potential to reach a wider public. Reports of meetings recorded the views of many different voices and relayed them to an audience beyond those who attended the meeting.\(^{12}\) This chapter will show how newspapers were perceived by the Circle as being essential media to advertise, transmit and mobilise public opinion in early nineteenth-century Manchester.

This chapter will, firstly, examine how and why the Circle utilised local political institutions to articulate their idea of public opinion. The Circle were pragmatic politicians enough to make use of these institutions when possible, but on other occasions, such as when they faced opposition or apathy from officials, they criticised them as self-selecting, unrepresentative, and unaccountable. Secondly, the chapter will examine the reality behind the rhetoric of ‘deliberative assembly’. In practice, these meetings were exclusive and were never intended to be open to everyone. Finally, the chapter argues that while the Circle claimed that the assemblies spoke for the interests of the whole community, in reality they were forums that represented the interests of a small public that was present in Manchester. Deliberative

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\(^{10}\) Read, *Press and People*, pp. 152, 192-8.

\(^{11}\) *Manchester Guardian*, 7 September 1822.

meetings, although more transparent and open than the meetings conducted by the local elites, were forums for a small public of intelligent, affluent and aspiring men to assert themselves and their views politically, while seeking to lead and represent the wider community.

**Local politics: a forum for legitimate political expression.**

Manchester’s local political institutions provided the platform for the Circle’s distinctive brand of middle-class and liberal deliberative extra-parliamentary politics. Before the 1832 Reform Act, local politics was the centre of political activity in unrepresented towns such as Manchester. In such a context, the members of the Circle utilised meetings convened by local officials as arenas to invoke and constitute a rational, bourgeois public. James Vernon has observed, ‘Officially the political arena was defined by the legal framework upon which it rested, that is the institutions, offices, and representative structures of local and national government.’ Through these institutions ‘official definitions of the public political sphere were created’.13 Meetings held in public buildings and acting in concert with local institutions symbolised the legitimate expression of the opinion of the town. As Lynn Hunt has argued, ‘legitimacy’ was formed on a ‘general agreement on signs and symbols’.14 This same interpretation is useful here. The symbol of a local official in attendance, and the fact it took place in a public building such as the town hall, advertised the fact that a particular meeting was sanctioned by the duly constituted authority, and accordingly represented a legitimate expression of public opinion.

Like other towns in this period, local politics in Manchester was highly complex and dominated by archaic institutions and traditions. Before Manchester was incorporated as a municipal

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borough in 1838, when an elected Town Council was established, it was governed by the Court Leet and a patchwork of statute-based institutions: such as the highway commission, street commission and gas and light works commission. As Derek Fraser has observed, ‘England was not blessed with a system of local government’. Instead it ‘had a mosaic of manorial, parochial, township and borough institutions’. Accordingly, the Little Circle’s political activities happened in a climate where there was a complex, and to critics, anachronistic, system of local administration. Forming part of this complex system were the Court Leet, the Police Commission, and the Vestry; with the main officials for each institution being the Boroughreeve and constables, the police commissioners, and the Churchwardens, respectively.

The Court Leet was an administrative relic of the medieval manorial local political system, originally headed by the lord of the manor. Through custom and tradition, the Court Leet had exercised considerable political influence and authority in Manchester. By the early nineteenth century, the hereditary lord of the manor came from the Mosley family, from the Staffordshire gentry, who appointed stewards who acted as ceremonial and symbolic heads. Although they did not provide any direct influence over the management of the town of Manchester, the lord of the manor and his steward chose a jury of 12 individuals to appoint officers to the Court Leet. The main officials of the Court Leet were the Boroughreeve and Constables, who were elected during an annual session that was held in the winter. The most important function of the Court Leet was the Boroughreeve’s authority to convene (or indeed to decline to convene) public meetings in response to requisitions.

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The Vestry was another important local institution, which had a ‘variety of administrative and quasi-judicial functions’.\(^\text{18}\) The authority of the Vestry stemmed from traditional ecclesiastical boundaries. Because the parish had the authority to raise local rates, elected officials – known as Churchwardens – were appointed by the leypayers to oversee these taxes. By definition the Churchwardens were Anglicans, and their ability to levy the church rates on non-Anglicans for the upkeep of local established source was a longstanding grievance of Protestant Dissenters. In this arena, as elsewhere, religious differences underscored the struggle between the Circle and their local political rivals. Prior to the repeal of the Test and Corporations Act in 1828, Dissenters or Nonconformists were formally excluded from local political office, and as Richard Brent has commented, the ‘Anglican State interfered at every significant point’ in the lives of Nonconformists.\(^\text{19}\)

The disputes over the church rates in Manchester provide a good example of how Nonconformists became more politically assertive and influential in early nineteenth-century provincial England.\(^\text{20}\) For example, in 1824, during a Vestry meeting held to discuss parish finances, the Boroughreeve asked why Thomas Potter objected to using these funds to support a new church organ. In response, Potter said he attended ‘chapel’ rather than the church, that is to say he was a Dissenter.\(^\text{21}\) Although he was a Nonconformist, Potter staked his claim to object on the grounds of being a taxpayer who therefore had a direct personal interest in the payment from public funds for a new church organ. Potter did not believe Unitarians or other Nonconformists should subsidise someone else’s religion. Underlying his view was a

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\(^{18}\) Fraser, Urban Politics, p. 31.


\(^{21}\) Manchester Guardian, 6 November 1824.
preference for religious voluntaryism: the idea that no single religion should receive funds from
the state, but each denomination should support themselves through voluntary subscriptions
and donations.

The Police Commission was another vital local institution, established by the Manchester
Police Act of 1792. The Commission was responsible for the cleansing, watching, lighting and
regulating the streets, passages and places within Manchester. Police Commission meetings
were held in order to pass and audit accounts.\textsuperscript{22} Commissioners were appointed and had to
meet the required property qualification, which was the value of £30 rental payments per year.
In 1828 there were 1,800 commissioners in Manchester based on this qualification. Vic Gatrell
has noted that nearly half of these commissioners regularly attended general meetings. This
scale of participation caused meetings to ‘grow tumultuous’ and that ‘business finally broke
down’ in 1828.\textsuperscript{23} For example, a Police Commission meeting was held on 30 January 1828 to
discuss a reduction in the price of gas. Prentice observed that when it became clear that no
amicable agreement was going to be made in this meeting a riot broke out. Prentice noted that
meetings of commissioners were ‘constantly becoming more numerous and more stormy, till
it was not an uncommon thing to see eight hundred commissioners present at a meeting, and
to witness proceedings as little deliberative’ as ‘we sometimes see in the front of the
hustings’.\textsuperscript{24}

In order to function more efficiently and demonstrate a more deliberative quality to their
meetings, both the Police Commission’s liberal and Tory members realised that the
membership of this local political institution had to be reduced. Tories in Manchester sought

\textsuperscript{22} Redford, \textit{Local Government}, pp. 201-8.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, p. 258; V. Gatrell, ‘Incorporation and the Pursuit of Liberal Hegemony in Manchester 1890-1839’ in D.
\textsuperscript{24} Prentice, \textit{Sketches}, pp. 313-6.
to diminish the number of participants in Police Commission meetings by about a quarter. By contrast the members of the Little Circle did not want to raise the property qualification. Richard Potter, Brotherton, Harvey, Baxter and Prentice formed part of a successful deputation to counteract a Tory one that travelled to Westminster. The Tory deputation sought to reduce the number of commissioners by raising the qualification to £35. In 1829 the Police Act was amended and Manchester and the neighbouring town of Salford’s Police Commissioners were split into two smaller and separate institutions. Manchester’s Police Commission would now be comprised of 240 men as well as the Boroughreeve and Constables. The 1829 Act lowered the property qualification for election to the commission to £28 after protracted political debate. Although the new Police Commission was smaller, men who paid rents of £16 a year were allowed to vote in elections for this institution. The Circle’s deputation to London proved that they were a competent political force in Manchester that was capable of delivering a successful compromise.

Manchester’s local institutions were an exclusive political sphere. Historians of early nineteenth-century British politics have described how local politics was dominated by closed, self-selecting, and corrupt interest groups, largely Tory and Anglican, who were reluctant to engage with ideas and interests opposed to their own. As Michael Turner suggests, ‘Mancunians who demanded and campaigned for local reforms in the years after the Napoleonic war’ complained that the town’s ‘administrative organs were almost exclusively in the hands of a local Tory elite’. The fact that these institutions and offices were controlled

by Tory-Anglicans effectively excluded Nonconformist groups like the Circle from public office, but not public influence.

The indoor public meeting, convened by a local official, offered middle-class political groups the space and opportunity to articulate an expression of public opinion that appeared to be legitimate and formulated through calm and rational debate. Members of the Circle placed a premium on the use of indoor public meetings after 1819. However, in 1812 this understanding of how to express public opinion was not yet fully developed. In April 1812, John Edward Taylor was accused by local Tories of organising the production of handbills and placards that encouraged local inhabitants to voice their objections to a public meeting that was to take place in the Manchester Exchange Dining Room. This is the first instance, albeit allegedly, where any Circle member attempted to influence the proceedings of a public meeting being held in Manchester. Originally, this meeting proposed to offer thanks to the Prince Regent for ‘retaining his father’s ministers in office’. However, the present ministry was deeply unpopular in Manchester, because they resisted the emancipation of Catholics. Nevertheless, Taylor’s efforts to raise a local objection to the meeting were ultimately hijacked by a mob who wanted to cause damage and destruction in order to demonstrate their political grievances. Subsequently, Taylor was accused by local Tory authorities in the town of inciting the mob, as a result of his part in producing handbills and placards.  

Attending their own small public meetings, offered a far calmer and more disciplined way to express objections and opinions for the members of the Circle. Yet before 1819, the few meetings the Circle did attend were held in taverns of pubs, rather than being convened with the authority of local political figures and in local political institutions. Historians have shown

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how meetings were frequently organised in local taverns and pubs. Edward Baxter, for example, attended a meeting of merchants, manufacturers and shopkeepers in Manchester, that was held in the Dog Tavern in 1813. This meeting was held specifically to discuss measures, which local middle-class men such as Baxter felt ought to be adopted in consequence of a recent bankruptcy bill that had been brought in by the Lord Advocate of Scotland. In the meeting’s estimation, the Bill did not seem calculated enough to ‘introduce a more fair and equitable administration of bankruptcy estates’. In addition, Richard Potter attended a meeting six years later on 21 January 1819 of ‘Merchants, Manufacturers, Shopkeepers and Tradesmen of Manchester and the Neighbourhood’, which was held in the Dog Tavern. This meeting discussed the means to challenge the ‘Acts of Parliament’, which had been recently passed to ‘force’ the relief of insolvent debtors.

The post-Peterloo legal context established by the Seditious Meetings Prevention Act (1819), passed as one of ‘Six Acts’ intended to repress radicalism, stipulated that any meeting of 50 people or more to discuss issues relating to church or state had to gain prior approval from a local magistrate or authority. The 1819 Act forced political groups such as the members of the Circle to adopt new spaces to meet, assemble and discuss politics. Navickas has argued that the impact of the Six Acts ‘on radical action was immediate, and effectively lasted until well after their expiration in 1825. The legislation … limited and channelled collective action into other means and areas’. The Six Acts forced the Circle to reassess what political forums they should utilise in order to represent public opinion. In the post-1819 context, the Circle

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30 Cowdroy’s Gazette, 30 October 1813.

31 The Morning Post, 30 January 1819.

32 Navickas, Protest and the Politics of Space, p. 99.
increasingly turned to forums that offered opportunities to claim legitimacy and project an image of rational and deliberative discussion. For the most part, historians of popular politics have focused on arenas such as the theatre and public dinners as venues where ‘radicals’ expressed their own political opinions following the passage of the Six Acts. Importantly, these venues did not require any prior approval from a local official. Radicals exploited loopholes in the legal framework that allowed them to demonstrate their stance and opinions on issues within settings that technically operated within the confines of the law.33

The Circle preferred to operate inside the law, through institutions that claimed the sanction of local authority. Significantly, the members of the Circle recognised that the Boroughreeve and Constables had the power and authority to convene public meetings.34 In order for the members of the Circle to organise a public meeting to discuss a political or social issue, they required the sanction of these local officials. Between 1821 and 1832 ninety-five public meetings were convened following a formal requisition to the Boroughreeve and Constables. Figure 3.1 reveals significant spikes in the number of public meetings convened by the Boroughreeve. Figure 3.1 also demonstrates that there were fourteen meetings held in 1821 convened by the Boroughreeve, mainly about issues associated with the currency, as well as efforts to organise public events to celebrate the coronation of George IV. There was a moderate increase in the number of public meetings convened by the Boroughreeve in 1827, when meetings were held to organise commemorations for the late Duke of York and to support Lord John Russell’s proposal to transfer parliamentary seats from Penryn and East Retford to Manchester and Birmingham.

34 Manchester Guardian, 20 October 1821.
Figure 3.1

Chart Showing the Frequency of Public Meetings Convened by the Boroughreeve 1821 to 1831.

Source: Boroughreeve’s records relating to public meetings in Manchester, Manchester Archives+, M91/33/1 and M91/33/2.

Figure 3.1 demonstrates that the most dramatic increase in public meetings convened by the Boroughreeve occurred in 1831, which was stimulated by the issue of parliamentary reform. Out of the nineteen public meetings held in Manchester in 1831, seventeen were organised in support of parliamentary reform, and in all of these the Circle were leading participants. After January 1831, the members of the Circle helped form a Reform Committee in Manchester that was responsible for drafting petitions and organising deputations to London in favour of parliamentary reform. This committee was sanctioned and mediated by the Boroughreeve, Benjamin Braidley. Watkin explained in his diary that it was important to build a dialogue with their local officials and patiently make their case for a public meeting.35 In a meeting held on 9 March 1831, Richard Potter praised the conduct of the Boroughreeve and thanked him for the ‘handsome and prompt’ response to their requisition, which had been signed by 270 of the most ‘respectable and ‘spirited’ gentlemen of Manchester.36

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36 Manchester Times, 12 March 1831.
Requisitions were not always accepted and the Boroughreeve could exercise his right to refuse a call for a public meeting. For example, in 1820 the members of the Little Circle asked the Boroughreeve to convene a meeting in support for George IV’s wife, Queen Caroline, whom the king was divorcing on the grounds of adultery: an issue which became a cause célèbre for radicals, reformers and critics of the political status quo. Unsurprisingly, given the Tory and loyalist preferences of the Boroughreeve and the local governing elite, this request was declined. Later, in 1826 a requisition was denied by the Boroughreeve for a meeting in favour of the abolition of slavery. The request was denied by the Boroughreeve, William Lomas, after ‘much consideration’ even though it had been a ‘highly respectable requisition’. The Boroughreeve explained that he had declined the requisition as he feared that the meeting would disturb the peace of the town.

The Circle used the declining of requisitions to criticise the propriety of public meetings depending on the whims of unrepresentative and unaccountable officials. The Manchester Guardian complained of the ‘system which has long and so generally prevailed amongst the municipal officers of this town … of refusing to convene public meetings, however respectable the requisition which it may be called upon to do so, unless for purposes which happened to be conformable to their own views’. Edward Baxter complained that the town’s officials were ‘generally chosen out of a class in the community’ which would ‘not allow public meetings being held at all if they could help it’. Complaining of the rule of a Tory-Anglican clique, the Circle argued that officials came from the ‘same class’ of people who were regarded as the ‘principal inhabitants’ of Manchester. In Prentice’s opinion, these people ‘for a long period had manifested, so far as they safely could, their attachment to the arbitrary and despotic

37 Liverpool Mercury, 15 December 1820.
38 Boroughreeve’s records relating to public meetings in Manchester, Manchester Archives+, M91/33/1, f.170.
39 Manchester Guardian, 4 November 1826.
40 Manchester Courier, 19 August 1826.
principles of the Stuart family’. Prentice’s estimation of these people was so low in fact that he argued that they ‘regarded the revolution of 1688 … as a dangerous innovation’.  

However, as far as it can be ascertained from the Boroughreeve’s papers relating to public meetings, supplemented by newspaper articles, between 1820 and 1832 the Boroughreeve only refused four meetings. Yet it also important to point out that most of the meetings convened in this period usually met to discuss uncontroverted and unpartisan issues such as royal events. When the Boroughreeve did refuse to call a meeting, he did so because he believed it was a controversial topic. These refusals highlighted that there were political divisions present in Manchester.

Yet when we compare the number of public meetings convened by the Boroughreeve against the four meetings that were refused, it can be reasonably assumed that the members of the Circle were being overly critical towards these local officials. The Circle’s criticism towards the Boroughreeve might have been unwarranted; however, it was also designed to bolster their own reputation as guardians of the political interests of the people of Manchester. Furthermore, they were correct in arguing that the Boroughreeve was not accountable to the public. When these officials denied meetings, the Manchester Guardian argued that ‘none of the public offices could be discharged with a strict adherence to the letter of the laws which regulate them’.  

If Manchester’s local officials disagreed with them, the Circle were prepared to make trenchant criticisms of their unresponsiveness, exclusivity, and lack of accountability. Richard Potter, for instance, lambasted Joseph Greene, a previous Boroughreeve of their town, as the ‘Alpha and Omega of the town’s officers’, who was unresponsive to the general opinion of the community. Periodically, the members of the Circle sniped that their town officials had

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42 Manchester Guardian, 8 March 1823.
‘inclosed themselves snugly in a room’ in order to make decisions without any local consultation.\textsuperscript{43} After the Boroughreeve declined to call a meeting on slavery in 1826, Edward Baxter complained that any application to himself and the Constables was completely ‘useless’.\textsuperscript{44} The \textit{Manchester Guardian}, with some exaggeration, argued that the local political strife ‘has its origin, we believe, entirely in causes springing out of the general system customarily pursued by municipal officers in this town’. With this in mind they believed that there was a ‘need to inform’ their readers that for the ‘last dozen years’ almost ‘every requisition for a public meeting, however respectably signed’, regardless of the issue, was refused by the Boroughreeve and Constables.\textsuperscript{45} By publicising these refusals, the Circle wanted to demonstrate that their town’s officials were unresponsive and arbitrary in representing the wider community. Yet when we compare the number of public meetings convened by the Boroughreeve against the four meetings that were refused, it can be reasonably assumed that the members of the Circle were being overly critical towards these local officials. The Circle’s criticism towards the Boroughreeve might have been unwarranted; however, it was also designed to bolster their own reputation as guardians of the political interests of the people of Manchester. Furthermore, they were correct in arguing that the Boroughreeve was not accountable to the public. When these officials denied meetings, the \textit{Manchester Guardian} argued that ‘none of the public offices could be discharged with a strict adherence to the letter of the laws which regulate them’.\textsuperscript{46} If Manchester’s local officials disagreed with them, the Circle were prepared to make trenchant criticisms of their unresponsiveness, exclusivity, and lack of accountability. Richard Potter, for instance, lambasted Joseph Greene, a previous Boroughreeve of their town, as the

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Manchester Guardian}, 10 May 1823.
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Manchester Guardian}, 21 August 1826.
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Manchester Guardian}, 18 November 1826.
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Manchester Guardian}, 8 March 1823.
‘Alpha and Omega of the town’s officers’, who was unresponsive to the general opinion of the community. Periodically, the members of the Circle sniped that their town officials had ‘inclosed themselves snugly in a room’ in order to make decisions without any local consultation. After the Boroughreeve declined to call a meeting on slavery in 1826, Edward Baxter complained that any application to himself and the Constables was completely ‘useless’. The *Manchester Guardian*, with some exaggeration, argued that the local political strife ‘has its origin, we believe, entirely in causes springing out of the general system customarily pursued by municipal officers in this town’. With this in mind they believed that there was a ‘need to inform’ their readers that for the ‘last dozen years’ almost ‘every requisition for a public meeting, however respectably signed’, regardless of the issue, was refused by the Boroughreeve and Constables. By publicising these refusals, the Circle wanted to demonstrate that their town’s officials were unresponsive and arbitrary in representing the wider community.

Indoor public meetings convened and attended by the Circle were defined by a set of procedures and conventions. First and foremost the location had to be specified in the initial requisition for a public meeting. Frequently, a preliminary committee meeting preceded the main event of an indoor public meeting. During this initial committee meeting, at which a small number of attendants gathered, issues such as the location, wording and the proposed order of resolutions were discussed. Generally, indoor the meetings convened by the Circle were held in the Town Hall or Manor Court Room. Occasionally though, public meetings could be held in different spaces such as the Riding School, as was the case in October 1831 for a meeting.

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47 *Manchester Guardian*, 10 May 1823.
48 *Manchester Guardian*, 21 August 1826.
49 *Manchester Guardian*, 18 November 1826.
50 *Manchester Guardian*, 24 September 1831.
51 Watkin, *Diary*, p. 149.
held to discuss parliamentary reform.\footnote{Manchester Times, 15 October 1831.} This setting provided a much larger venue and accommodated more people than meetings held in the Town Hall or Manor Court Room. Meetings organised in the Manor Court Room or Town Hall were regularly described as being ‘cramped’.\footnote{Manchester Times, 19 August 1826; Manchester Times, 12 March 1831; Manchester Times, 24 September 1831.} Regrettably, the newspaper reports describing the use of space in these meetings often glosses over the room layout and how speakers were positioned. However, we do know that the chairman had a seat at the front of the room to monitor the conduct of the meeting. Speakers also ‘rose’ to deliver a speech from the front of the room.\footnote{Manchester Times, 24 September 1831; Manchester Guardian, 24 September 1831; Manchester Times, 15 October 1831.} Additionally, we know from an account of a public meeting held in the Manor Court Room in September 1831 to organise a petition praying that the House of Lords pass the Reform Bill without ‘any further delay’, that a ‘strengthened table’ could be deployed as makeshift platform for the nominated speaker to address the audience.\footnote{Manchester Guardian, 24 September 1831.}

The first business of an indoor public meeting was to appoint a chairman. It was the convention that a local official such as the Boroughreeve be appointed as chairman of the meeting. But if these local officials did not comply or were not present an alternative chairman was voted in to fill this role. These votes were cast by a show of hands. The chairman always then proceeded to read out loud the terms of the requisition, which was a notice addressed to a local official requesting a public meeting to address a specific to issue, to the assembled audience. The chairman made it clear to the audience that nothing irrelevant could be brought up in the meeting, and all speeches had to comply with the issue addressed specifically by the requisition. For example, in March 1831, during a Town Hall meeting to offer thanks for the present ministry for ‘pushing forward plans for parliamentary reform’, a ‘working-man called
Mr Monroe’ attempted to make an amendment calling for the secret ballot. The Boroughreeve and chairman of the meeting reminded the audience that they were gathered in the Town Hall simply to demonstrate praise towards the present ministry. No amendments could be made as the meeting had to follow the remit established by the requisition.\textsuperscript{56} Indoor public meetings were not designed to be open-ended discussions that allowed for dissenting views. If a public meeting was held to address a certain issue, it was compelled to abide by the terms framed in the original requisition.

In practice there appeared to be very little real deliberation in local indoor public meetings in Manchester and one speech built upon another until all nominated speakers had been heard. Motions and amendments had to be proposed and then seconded before being put to a show of hands. Although the chairman would not have been fully aware of the entire content of speeches, he had a clear idea of the order of speakers and what resolutions were to be moved as a result of the deliberations undertaken during the committee meeting that preceded the public one.\textsuperscript{57} Indoor public meetings were carefully choreographed events that were designed to give guaranteed time to a select group of speakers. If any man wanted to address the audience he could do so, as long as he received the permission of the chairman first.

Although the chairman did not make any speeches, his authority and understanding of the direction and tone of the meeting was paramount. In any indoor public meetings in Manchester votes were administered by the nominated chairman on various resolutions by way of cheers for two options, ‘Aye’ or ‘Nay’. Towards the end of the meeting a final resolution was passed, and the administration of any concluding business such as deciding which newspapers to

\textsuperscript{56}Manchester Times, 12 March 1831.  
\textsuperscript{57}Manchester Times, 12 March 1831; Manchester Guardian, 24 September 1831; Watkin, Diary, pp. 141-9.
advertise the resolutions of meetings, or where petitions should be placed in order to receive the most signatures from their fellow townsmen, took place.\textsuperscript{58} The last aspect of an indoor public meeting was a vote of thanks for the chairman. A nominated speaker would offer some acclamatory remarks both of the conduct of the chairman but also concerning the tone of the meeting.

Historical focus nevertheless has neglected the procedures and oratory of indoor public meetings, and has not been given the level of attention given to speeches elsewhere. For example, Joseph Meisel has chronicled the developments of speech making in the mid and late nineteenth century, particularly the platform speeches delivered by William Gladstone. He has examined the tone and quality of speeches in the House regarding religion, the law, the mass platform and the hustings. Meisel has illustrated how nineteenth-century parliamentarians such as Robert Peel embedded his speeches with flashes of classical quotations from Greek and Roman authors. However, later parliamentarians such as John Bright delivered speeches that were more prosaic and business like in their tone. Meisel has observed that the 1832 Reform Act ‘significantly altered the social and educational composition of the House – and therefore its oratory – for the worse’. Fewer speeches present classical allusions as more middle-class businessmen entered the House of Commons\textsuperscript{59}

Though the speeches and procedures of local indoor deliberative assemblies have been somewhat overlooked by historians, future MPs and local officials such as J.B Smith, Joseph Brotherton, Richard and Thomas Potter used these local indoor public meetings as a form of

\textsuperscript{58} Boroughreeve’s records relating to public meetings in Manchester, Manchester Archives+, M91/33/1 f. 406.

\textsuperscript{59} J. Meisel, \textit{Public Speech and the Culture of Public Life in the Age of Gladstone} (New York, 2001), pp. 79-105. See also Matthew, ‘Rhetoric and Politics in Britain’, 42-3; Martin, \textit{Popular Political Oratory and Itinerant Lecturing in Yorkshire}. 
apprenticeship in public speaking. Unlike previous generations of MPs who generally attended University debating societies, those members of the Circle who would enter the House of Commons harnessed their oratorical repertoire in local indoor public meetings. Whereas traditionally MPs had been tutored in classical rhetoric in public schools, at Oxford and Cambridge and through the bar, the members of the Circle were self-educated and gained oratorical experience in local political meetings in Manchester. These forums are significant therefore because they were training grounds for a new wave of middle-class MPs, at least in Manchester, who helped alter the tone and content of parliamentary speeches in a post-1832 context.

The intellectual content of speeches delivered by members of the Circle within indoor public meetings appeared plain spoken and directly relevant to the topic of the requisition. On the whole speakers did not present new ideas or attempt to make profound intellectual points. Circle member, Absalom Watkin, reminisced that the speeches he heard in public meetings during the 1830s, were characterised a ‘good deal of speaking, but no oratory’. 60 Before he presented his speech to a public meeting to address the effects of the Corn Laws on 19 August 1826, held in the Manor Court Room, Richard Potter stated that it was ‘fortunate for him, though dreadfully unfortunate for the country that no oratorical powers were necessary to persuade them to adopt the resolution’ of the meeting. Instead he would restrict himself to ‘make a few observations’. 61 Potter was aware of the limitations of his rhetorical prowess, and he understood that he did not have to be a gifted orator to have a prominent role in local public meetings. He and other members of the Circle prepared speeches that made observations about the current political movements and comments of politicians in Westminster. Members of the

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60 Watkin, Diary, p. 149.
61 Manchester Guardian, 19 August 1826.
Circle used anecdotes and quotes that came directly from politicians such as Henry Brougham, Alexander Baring and Earl Grey in Westminster.\footnote{Manchester Guardian 19 August 1826; Manchester Guardian, 24 September 1831.} Speeches presented in these meetings were not designed to be original or imaginative. They were designed instead to demonstrate that they were conversant with current debates and developments in parliament and the nation.

The most defining characteristic of the speeches delivered by Circle in these meetings was that they drew attention to the conduct of current or previous meetings. In a meeting held to discuss parliamentary reform in September 1831 in the Town Hall, John Shuttleworth stated that the present gathering was ‘palpable evidence in favour of this bill bow before me, which is afforded in the appearance and conduct of this large meeting’.\footnote{Manchester Guardian, 24 September 1831.} The intellectual content of the speeches delivered by the members of the Circle was not necessarily important. Rather the speeches delivered in these meetings were self-congratulatory and reaffirmed the impression that such gatherings in were capable of reaching an expression of unanimous public opinion in a cordial and peaceful way. Public meetings such as these were set-piece events designed to demonstrate a consensus and impression that public opinion in Manchester was united around a particular political issue. By leading these discussions the members of the Circle reinforced their reputation as capable representative and leaders of public opinion.

Members of the Circle understood that public meetings were legitimate as long as they were conducted in the legal and proper way. That is, as long as the meetings were held in a town building, followed rules and procedures, and openly advertised rather than organised in a closed, secretive way, they were legal and duly constituted. The Circle believed that public meetings convened by their local officials helped strengthen the legitimacy of a particular
assembly. Nevertheless, when one official failed to call a meeting, they would switch their attentions to another to convene it for them, including the lord of the manor, Sir Oswald Mosley. As Mosley was an Evangelical and supporter of the Anti-Slavery movement, he was more than willing to support an Anti-Slavery meeting in 1826.64 Another option available to the Circle was appealing to the Police Commission, which was especially attractive after 1825 when commissioners were able to use the town hall.65

Notwithstanding their criticisms of local officialdom, the Circle continued to believe that, as Edward Baxter declared during a meeting on Catholic relief in 1826, such gatherings had greater ‘political weight’ and ‘authority’ if they worked in concert with the officials of their town.66 The presence of the Boroughreeve and Constables, according to Richard Potter in a speech he made during a meeting held in July 1831, when the Boroughreeve had refused to convene the public meeting to discuss the £10 householder qualification, suggested that ‘Many persons attached greater importance to meetings when convened by the constituted authorities of the town’.67 Despite the fact that on this occasion the Boroughreeve and Constable had refused to call the meeting, Potter maintained that a meeting attended by these officials provided an added degree of political authority. This was an important point of difference between the Circle and radical reformers.

Even after the expiration of the Seditious Meetings Prevention Act in 1825, the Circle continued to send requests to their local officials. Richard Potter remarked, in 1827, during the meeting over the possible transfer of parliamentary seats from Penryn to Manchester, that he

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64 Liverpool Mercury, 15 December 1820; Manchester Guardian, 1 November 1823; Manchester Courier, 19 August 1826; Manchester Guardian, 21 August 1826; Manchester Times, 22 January 1831; Manchester Times, 2 July 1831.
65 Manchester Times, 2 July 1831.
66 Manchester Times, 19 August 1826.
67 Manchester Times, 2 July 1831.
believed ‘reformers’ in Manchester should ‘let the work be done by others not previously known as desiring progression’, namely the Tory officials. Potter and his colleagues in the Little Circle waited for local officials to affix their name to the top of the requisition for this meeting, while they signed their names towards the bottom.\textsuperscript{68} By putting the name of local officials to the forefront of this requisition, its perceived respectability was enhanced. This requisition stipulated that ‘135 gentleman of the very first respectability’, formed an agreement that a committee should be assembled to deliberate on what further measures should be taken to secure the transfer of seats.\textsuperscript{69}

Increasingly, and as the memory of Peterloo receded, Potter and his colleagues in the Circle were confident enough to organise meetings under their own authority and in conjunction with other local officials, independently of the Boroughreeve and Constables. For ‘his part’, Potter thought that the meeting in July 1831 was ‘convened’ as if it ‘had been called by the Boroughreeve and Constables’.\textsuperscript{70} Although the Boroughreeve was not present at this meeting, the conduct and tone of the meeting meant that Potter felt that it was a close enough approximation to give it a sense of political legitimacy. The increase in public meetings in 1831 emphasises that by this time the Circle had become prominent and influential public figures in Manchester. They had become a group that was capable of guaranteeing the co-operation of their town’s political officials through negotiation and their reputation and capacity to organise public meetings out of their own initiative.

In theory, indoor public meetings were spaces that provided the opportunity for people excluded from the formal political processes of the nation (those not included in the franchise

\textsuperscript{68} Prentice, \textit{Sketches}, p. 305.
\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Manchester Courier}, 2 June 1827.
\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Manchester Times}, 2 July 1831.
and the right to hold public office) to vent and express their opinions in a legitimate local setting. As Malcolm Chase has argued, ‘local politics’ became a ‘forum where the middling sorts of society, excluded both from parliamentary voting and the office of magistrate’ became ‘increasingly involved with the business of government’. Local politics provided a legitimate setting to try and effect political change, and allowed the ‘middling sorts’ to detach themselves ‘from political radicalism and unrest among the lower orders’. The indoor public meeting possessed additional importance as it was an arena that had a decisive role to play in articulating the interests of a small and middle-class public in Manchester. These forums gave definition to the Circle’s understanding of ‘the people’ as being rational, bourgeois, educated and capable of forming deliberative discussions with one another.

Meetings were not only opportunities to demonstrate the settled opinions of the town, but provided a platform to broadcast the political ideas and opinions of Manchester more widely. For example, at the January 1831 meeting in favour of reform, Richard Potter declared that ‘the proceedings of this day will, in consequence of their rapidity with which intelligence is conveyed, soon find their way to meet parts of the kingdom’ and that the ‘government will hear of them’. He also said he would ‘trust’ that ‘the boroughmongers’, the anti-reformers and patrons who controlled rotten boroughs, ‘will hear of them’ as well. Arranging meetings in advance of parliamentary debates meant that they could strengthen the hand of ministers as in the reform agitation of 1830-32. When, in January 1831, the members of the Little Circle heard that a House of Commons debate on parliamentary reform was imminent, they responded by organising a meeting, hoping to influence events at Westminster.

72 Manchester Times, 22 January 1831.
Public meetings were organised in anticipation of parliamentary debates, to gain publicity for a cause and communicate demands to politicians as well as a wider public. This was a sentiment that was evident in numerous towns across Britain between January and March 1832. Many meetings were organised across the country before the introduction of the first English reform bill in early March 1831. The fact that Edward Baxter commented that the topic of the debate had been mooted ‘for some time’ before they actually requested it, reinforces the idea that the Little Circle chose their moments carefully to organise a town meeting. Baxter stated that it ‘will be known to all present, that parliament meets in February’ and that if they did not organise a meeting soon, they ‘might lose the opportunity of making known to the ministers … the opinion of the people of Manchester on the subject of reform in parliament’. It was important, from the point of view of the Circle, to visibly and unequivocally demonstrate how the ‘people’ of Manchester felt towards a particular political issue. These demonstrations of unanimity, as we shall see in the next section, were cultivated through calm and rational deliberations that emerged after a series of speeches and resolutions were put forward during a town meeting.

**Deliberative assemblies**

The members of the Little Circle described their meetings as ‘deliberative’ assemblies: by which they meant arenas for participants to meet and achieve unanimity through discussion and debate. This emphasis distinguishes them from other political groups in this period. Tory meetings for instance had a largely acclamatory function for endorsing various political

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74 *Manchester Guardian*, 22 January 1831.
leaders. Patricia Hollis has also observed that ‘unruly constituencies … and unruly unions … were thought to pre-empt or intimidate’ Parliament’s ‘deliberative role’. The Circle did not attempt to intimidate or implicitly threaten Parliament through mass mobilisation as in the case of political unions or popular radicalism. Rather, the Circle attended deliberative meetings with the aim of demonstrating that a middle class and male public in Manchester were able to reach calm, intelligent and rational opinions. The indoor public meeting was perceived by the members of the Circle as a legitimate forum that could safeguard the interests of the entire community. Although in practice the audience of indoor meetings was composed of a small, middle class public, the members of the Circle believed this was a suitable forum for men such as themselves to debate and reconcile the interests of their community in a rational and deliberative fashion. This section shows how the public who attended these indoor meetings were able to position themselves and demonstrate their capacity and suitability to have their political concerns and opinions taken seriously.

Whilst the Little Circle did not want to pre-empt or intimidate Parliament, they were not afraid to criticise it. For example, the Manchester Guardian commented unfavourably on Parliament’s support for the late wars with revolutionary and Napoleonic France, and the legislature’s maintenance of the unpopular Corn Laws. The newspaper doubted the claim of the Foreign Secretary (and later Prime Minister) George Canning, ‘that public opinion at present pervades and checks, and, perhaps in the last resort, nearly governs the whole’. In response, the Manchester Guardian said they would strongly ‘contradict this assertion, and call upon anyone to prove its truth’. The Circle’s critique of Parliament echoed their indictment of local institutions. The Circle criticised both local and national institutions for being

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78 Manchester Guardian, 7 September 1822.
unrepresentative, unresponsive, promoting corruption, misgovernment, and exclusive aristocratic interests, such as the Corn Laws and the established church at the expense of the common good. Furthermore, and contrasting with Canning’s perspective, the Manchester Guardian questioned the agency and influence of public opinion within the unreformed political system, writing that there was a ‘natural vis inertiae’ in ‘public opinion’. Recalling the Queen Caroline affair of 1820, the newspaper commented ‘There perhaps never was a period at which public opinion was more loudly and unequivocally expressed than in favour of the late queen – but what did it achieve for her?’

The Manchester Guardian’s comments thus reflected a wider ambivalence about public opinion at this time. Dror Wahrman for instance has noted that by the mid-1820s there was an air of disappointment – particularly in newspapers and in works such as William Mackinnon’s On the Rise, and Present State of Public Opinion (1828) – concerning the potency of public opinion. While there was an ‘uncritical faith in “public opinion” at the beginning of the decade’ this was matched ‘only by the depth of its critical disillusionment by the decade’s end’. However, middle-class groups such as the Circle remained eager to formulate their own expressions of public opinion. Indoor deliberative assemblies were perceived by the members of the Circle as opportunities to express and interpret public opinion in Manchester. Meetings were platforms to express, in ‘the least equivocal manner’, the ideas and opinions of the ‘inhabitants’ of their town and indeed, the ‘nation’.

By contrast, local officials in Manchester tried to draw a distinction between meetings that were sought due to a temporary, passing political excitement that were likely to disturb the

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79 Ibid.
80 Wahrman, Imagining the Middle Class, p. 104.
81 Manchester Times, 3 December 1831.
peace of the town, as in the case of the declined requisitions for meetings in favour of Queen Caroline or anti-slavery, and issues that reflected more permanent interests. The Little Circle however were optimistic that different views could be harmonised. They believed deliberation would lead to unanimity and consensus through compromise and mutual understanding, rather than lead to discord. In 1820, Baxter argued that indoor assemblies were opportunities to exhibit and demonstrate a capacity to reach decisions defined by their ‘firmness and moderation’.82 This was illustrated during a meeting to discuss the salary of the deputy constable, Mr. Lavender, in 1831. Many attendees at this meeting objected to Lavender receiving an enhanced salary of £500 per year, believing instead that £300 was more suitable. A late compromise proposal, moved by Prentice, suggested that the salary should be reduced to £400 per year. Ultimately, this salary was accepted.83 This meeting demonstrated that compromises could be reached through rational discussion, and people of different opinions could reach a measure of cordiality with one another.

Yet deliberation and consensus did not mean extinguishing different views. Instead, deliberation provide the opportunity for the harmonisation and reconciliation of opposing opinions. During the January 1831 meeting on parliamentary reform, Baxter commented that ‘differences of opinion existed on every question’ and recognised that it was ‘not to be expected that all would be brought to think the same upon the same subject’. But discussion clarified priorities and highlighted agreements on the key issues. As Baxter put it, ‘in whatever minor points they differed there would be no differences as to the grand object itself’.84 The Circle’s nuanced understanding of the role of a meeting was one of the reasons why they believed that

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82 Liverpool Mercury, 15 December 1820.
83 Manchester Times, 8 October 1831; Manchester Guardian, 8 October 1831.
84 Manchester Times, 22 January 1831.
they could represent the interests of the whole community. This was because through meetings, the Circle listened to and recognised different viewpoints.

Broad discussion was the best way to avoid a narrow and self-serving focus. Mass platform meetings were seen by the Circle’s members as events that only presented and amplified one side of an argument – the main speaker’s. The *Manchester Times*, for example, criticised a recent visit by Henry Hunt to Manchester in April 1831, to speak on parliamentary reform, as a ‘very hasty one’. The newspaper argued that Hunt’s ‘hasty’ visits were ‘unfavourable to ascertaining the state of public opinion’. From the *Manchester Times*’s viewpoint, the crowds there were ‘not met for the purpose of DISCUSSION’. Instead, they had been called together for the sole purpose of ‘HEARING MR HUNT’. In fact, the scale of these meetings led the *Manchester Guardian* to question whether a ‘twentieth part of the assemblage’ could ‘hear even the sound of the speaker’s voice’. 85 Unlike the indoor public meeting, mass platform meetings were criticised for failing to initiate a meaningful debate amongst the attendants, with much of the set-piece orations being inaudible to the crowd.

Mass meetings were regarded by the members of the Circle as convenient personal platforms that the likes of Hunt used to express his political views, but little more. Mistakenly, according to the *Manchester Times*, Hunt believed the applause for universal suffrage, vote by ballot, and annual parliaments indicated that the people who attended these meetings were opposed to anything that fell short of these measures. The *Manchester Times* argued that public opinion had previously demonstrated commitment towards the ministerial plan for reform in other town meetings. If Hunt had ‘attended any of the public meetings that were held to discuss the

85 *Manchester Guardian*, 1 November 1828.
ministerial measures, he would not have fallen into that error’. For the Circle, attendees at these mass platform meetings did not have the opportunity to deliberate on an issue; rather they were spectators, and insofar as they could hear the speakers, an audience could only listen to the grandstanding of particular individuals. This perception was something that was also recognised by the Manchester Times in relation to how a Mr. Oates (the editor of the Voice of the People) was treated by Hunt during a meeting held in Manchester to discuss the forthcoming Preston election in 1831. Oates asked the meeting whether they had ‘witnessed a more manifest course of injustice pursued towards a public man’ such as himself. While Hunt had, in the course of his address, ‘thanked the people of Manchester because they did not condemn him unheard’, Oates had been ‘censured’ and condemned by Mr Hunt ‘because he dared to differ in opinion with him’.

Although it was important to weigh up and balance lots of different points of opinion, the members of the Circle believed that it was vital for a meeting to reach some form of unanimous agreement. Meetings were opportunities for the ‘numerous inhabitants’ of Manchester to come together to speak out on an issue with one voice. During a meeting held to petition for parliamentary reform (held in January 1831) Richard Potter stated that ‘when people arise, as if it were like one man’, ‘beneficial results’ would ‘ensue’. In a separate meeting, held later in the year to offer ‘approbation’ for ministerial efforts to pilot a reform bill through Parliament, Prentice said that it was important for their meetings ‘not to be misunderstood’. Meetings were arranged to demonstrate that opinion in Manchester was settled and unanimous on a particular issue. The political consequence, for the Circle, would be that such demonstrations of support would strengthen the position of ministers. As long as the ‘purpose’ of ministers

86 Manchester Times, 16 April 1831.
87 Manchester Times, 7 May 1831.
88 Manchester Times, 22 January 1831.
89 Manchester Times, 12 March 1831.
was ‘good’, ‘such assurances of support’ would prompt ministers to adopt ‘stronger and better measures’. Taylor suggested that the record of peaceful and deliberative meetings provided an example for other towns to emulate, and would embolden ministers.\(^{90}\) It was desirable therefore that ‘that the people should avail themselves of every opportunity’ to engage in ‘public meetings’, to articulate the ‘principles of reform’ to government.\(^{91}\) As we shall see in the next section, though, the actual ‘people’ the Circle wanted to attend their meeting referred only to a specific group of similar, affluent and intelligent individuals.

**Defining ‘the public’: popular participation in deliberative assemblies.**

The deliberative assembly allowed the Little Circle to provide a formal political definition to their own understanding of the public. Within these forums, the ‘people’ could be represented by a small public capable of expressing the combined interests and political opinions of their fellow townsmen. In the previous chapter, we observed how this public referred to a small, rational body of intelligent individuals similar to the Circle, and that they were influenced by Bentham’s ideas, including the ‘Public Opinion Tribunal’.\(^{92}\) Jürgen Habermas, more recently, has suggested that a ‘Public Sphere’ existed in the coffee houses, the press and salons of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Europe, which constituted of a body of a bourgeois and rational-thinking public.\(^{93}\) Less attention, however, has been directed towards the role of indoor meetings – particularly deliberative assemblies – in shaping and defining this rational middle-class public.

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91 *Manchester Times*, 3 December 1831.


93 Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. 
The Little Circle contrasted the open, public meeting, which legitimately spoke for the entire town, with clandestine, secretive and exclusive gatherings that could not claim to be representative. For example, a meeting held in Salford in the immediate wake of Peterloo, that thanked the magistrates, yeomanry, officers and soldiers for their handling of the mass meeting, was regarded by the Circle as just such an illegitimate and unrepresentative forum. The Circle, many of whom signed a declaration condemning the authorities conduct, claimed that the Salford event was really a ‘private meeting’, and not a convention of the ‘highly respectable … inhabitants of Salford and their Neighbourhood’. Accordingly, the Circle called for the ‘inhabitants of Manchester and Salford’ to have a ‘PUBLIC OPPORTUNITY of expressing the REAL OPINIONS of the subject’.

Meetings that were not advertised, or only at short notice, could not legitimately claim to be true deliberative assemblies. The Little Circle’s members believed it was vital to advertise their own meetings in advance in the town’s local newspapers. The Bridgewater Arms meeting in 1825, which met to oppose Catholic relief, was regarded as being a ‘hole and corner’ assembly, because it lacked any formal ‘public notice’ and did not provide ‘ample opportunity to secure the countenance all persons’, of ‘every mode of thinking, to attend and express their sentiments’. In fact, it was reported that ‘Persons were not allowed to attend the meeting who were known to be unfavourable to the object they had in view: in short, the meeting had no claim to the title of a deliberative assembly, which it purported to be’. The meeting sought to prevent emancipationists from engaging in debate, and was effectively a closed meeting.

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94 *Cowdroy’s Gazette*, 4 September 1819.
95 *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 December 1820; *Manchester Guardian*, 1 November 1823; *Manchester Courier*, 19 August 1826; *Manchester Guardian*, 21 August 1826; *Manchester Guardian*, 22 January 1831; *Manchester Times*, 2 July 1831.
96 *Manchester Courier*, 7 May 1825.
In a similar vein, the *Manchester Guardian* identified a ‘Late Anti-National Education Meeting’, held in March 1832, as ‘not a deliberative’ meeting. A meeting of clergymen and local gentry organised a meeting held in the Exchange Room in Manchester to protest against the government’s plan for a system of non-denominational publicly funded education in Ireland, which had been fiercely opposed by members of the established church in both England and Ireland and the Tories in Parliament. Particularly controversial was the proposal to appropriate some of the surplus revenues of the Irish church to fund the new system of education. The *Manchester Guardian* reported that the people organising the meeting ‘knew well that none but persons entertaining a particular kind of opinion were called together; that admission was to be had only by tickets’. Richard Potter for instance attempted to enter the meeting and speak; however, he was prevented from doing so as he was labelled as an ‘intruder’.  

97 *Manchester Guardian*, 31 March 1832.


Deliberative assemblies were forums to showcase how a reasoning and bourgeois public existed in Manchester: one that had the potential to make an effective political contribution, both in their town, but also in the representative political system of the nation. In particular, this section builds on the idea, proposed by Alan Kahan, that the quality of rationality, moderate thinking, talent and education was regarded as the key criteria by nineteenth-century liberal politicians, in a number of polities, for an individual’s possession of the franchise.  

The members of the Little Circle believed they and others like themselves had this capacity to govern and lead opinion in their town. Deliberative assemblies were the forums that allowed them to demonstrate their own ‘capacity’ to represent public opinion in Manchester, and display their fitness for the franchise.
Members of the Circle believed that deliberative assemblies should be large enough to listen to and weigh up different ideas and opinions, but also small enough and elite enough to encourage a rational and considered debate. Thus, the choice and size of their meeting place became a crucial aspect of shaping the Little Circle’s idea of the ‘public’. As Mark Harrison observes, the choice of meeting place was of central importance to the ‘crowd gathering process’ in the early nineteenth century.99 The meetings the Little Circle attended were held at certain times of the day, in small rooms, which meant a substantial element of the town were left out of proceedings. This fact was not lost on William Ashmore, ‘recently of Peterloo’, who was quick to point this out at a meeting held in the town hall in March 1831 to discuss parliamentary reform. Ashmore expressed his ‘deep regret that the public meeting of the inhabitants of Manchester should be called in such a room’. Ashmore felt that the people who had convened the meeting had deliberately used a small room to prevent people who demanded universal suffrage from being given a platform.100 The indoor deliberative assembly was a forum that denied an equal hearing to people who expressed different interests and political expectations, and gave an advantage to middle-class reformers.

Although it was not uncommon for ‘working-men’ to speak at these meetings, the main speakers were usually men of ‘high commercial rank in the community’.101 It should be reiterated that meetings were usually held in the morning and on weekdays when working-class people were working. Nevertheless, these meetings were not convened by circular or ticket, and did not specifically exclude working-class people from attending if they were available. The meetings were formally open to all. Working-class individuals, such as Jonathan

100 *Manchester Times*, 24 March 1831.
101 Ibid.
Hodgins and Elijah Dixon, were able to attend these meetings. When such individuals attended, the Little Circle believed they could legitimately claim that an assembly represented the opinions of their town. John Shuttleworth, for example, during a meeting held to petition for a reform of the representative system (1831), declared the gathering before him was ‘palpable evidence in favour of the bill before him, which is afforded in appearance and conduct of this large meeting’. During this meeting, he pointed out that ‘all classes of reformers’ were present for the promotion of the present Reform Bill being debated in Parliament.\textsuperscript{102}

At the same time, though, the novelty of Jonathan Hodgin’s speech underscored how rare it was for speakers of his socio-economic status to attend let alone speak at these meetings. Invariably, the main speakers of these meetings were the likes of Richard Potter, Baxter or Shuttleworth. Nevertheless, working-men such as Elijah Dixon were regularly afforded opportunities to speak at these meetings. However, the main point to make here was that they were usually the last names to be called upon to offer their opinions indicating their lowly status in the order of precedence. Meanwhile, during the same meetings, priority to speak went to the likes of Richard Potter, Thomas Potter, Baxter or Shuttleworth.\textsuperscript{103} While reformers of all classes could and did attend meetings, this did not mean that they were given equal status as speakers. The fact that these proceedings were controlled by members of the Little Circle was not lost on spectators such as a Mr. Dyer, who during a meeting on parliamentary reform, purporting to be a meeting of the ‘inhabitants of Manchester and adjoining townships’, requested that Richard Potter be removed as chairman. The objection was made on the grounds that Potter was not listening to any resolutions from other individuals like Dyer. Despite Dyer’s request that a vote should be held to see if Potter was ‘popular’ enough to remain as chairman,

\textsuperscript{102} Manchester Guardian, 24 September 1831.
\textsuperscript{103} Notable recorded occurrences with the Little Circle speaking at the beginning and the likes of Dixon at the end of a meeting include Manchester Times, 22 January 1831; Manchester Times, 24 September 1831; Manchester Times, 15 October 1831.
the meeting continued as normal. This was a good example of how the members of the Circle were able to marginalise potential critics and challenges to their authority within this particular setting. The procedures and administrative aspects of these meetings worked in favour for the Little Circle, who were able to steer the meeting into following a particular line of thought and action.

Assemblies with fewer and more select participants could also enhance the image and reputation of the proceedings undertaken. For example, in calling together ‘the leypayers only’ in a meeting to discuss the salary of a constable, ‘the requisitioners’ – which included the members of the Little Circle – said they ‘were not actuated by any feeling of disrespect, or of the incompetence at large, to deliberate with themselves upon the questions before the meeting’. Baxter continued by suggesting that ‘in the present state of things’ a better ‘desired effect’ could be created if the town showed the resolutions passed in the meeting were ‘not carried by that part of the population wanting the necessaries of life’. Rather he contended that a meeting of leypayers – ‘those paying the town’s rates’ – would have a more significant chance of succeeding in their demands. An implication of this statement was that Baxter was suggesting that the leypayers, as the ones who paid taxes, were of more importance than the general population of their town, which they nevertheless claim to represent. A smaller body of leypayers present in this meeting, in Baxter’s eyes, had the capacity to deliberate and represent the interests of their town in a setting more conducive to deliberation and rational thinking.

104 Manchester Guardian, 2 July 1831.
105 Manchester Guardian, 20 August 1826.
The Little Circle’s members were aware that poorly attended meetings risked demonstrating that certain issues were unpopular or irrelevant, so there was a balance to strike between small numbers to facilitate deliberation and enough attendees to indicate a reasonable level of public support, and hence, legitimacy. Members of the Little Circle, for instance, objected to a meeting that had been convened by the Boroughreeve and Constables, held in the town hall, to offer the condolences of the ‘inhabitants’ of Manchester and Salford following the death of George IV in 1830. Sentiments around the country were generally disparaging towards George IV after his death. And as only approximately twenty-five people attended the meeting, Prentice interrupted the initial proceedings. He questioned whether, ‘with so slender attendance’, the meeting should ‘proceed at all’?\(^{106}\) Evidently, the meeting had failed to pique the interest of residents in Manchester. Anything that this poorly attended meeting had to say, had little claim to represent, legitimately, the wider ‘public opinion’ of Manchester.

There was a further balance to strike between having a well-attended meeting, and one that brought together too many conflicting ideas and opinions. While poorly attended meetings had their problems, larger audiences could come at the expense of the coherence and quality of debate. The *Manchester Guardian* believed that a meeting held in Kent – to debate the ‘Catholic Question’ – was not a ‘deliberative assembly’ due to the fact that it attracted too many irrational participants. ‘We questioned’, the *Manchester Guardian* wrote, ‘whether any assembly’ had ever seen such a ‘disorderly interruption of speakers, whose opinions were not that of the majority’. Conceivably, if participants were unable to hear a speaker, they would be unable to comprehend the points being made. The Little Circle was not above applying the same logic to Parliament. As the *Manchester Guardian* argued, the ‘diminution of the numbers

\(^{106}\) *Manchester Guardian*, 10 July 1830.
of members of the house of commons’, would ‘be beneficial’, and the ‘character of the house as a deliberative assembly improved by it’.\textsuperscript{107}

The Circle applied the same criticism to the political unions and Henry Hunt as well. In Manchester there were two political unions – the Manchester Political Union (MPU) and the radical Political Union of the Working Classes (PUWC).\textsuperscript{108} The MPU was founded by Prentice, among others, in 1831. However, other members of the Circle did not attach their names to its initial subscription.\textsuperscript{109} The fact that the rest of the Circle stood aloof highlights their discomfort with popular politics and mass political mobilisation. Although Nancy LoPatin has demonstrated how prolific political unions were in this period, Manchester’s two political unions failed to gain as much attention.\textsuperscript{110} The reasons for this failure have traditionally been attributed to Manchester’s polarised social structure, whereas Birmingham, it has usually been argued, was more fertile ground for forging cross-class political alliances.\textsuperscript{111} Such a view fails to take into account the importance of the differing political ideas of reformers, which were not merely the product of different socio-economic contexts. The Circle held aloof from both political unions largely because of their belief in the potential and capacity of a small and rational middle-class public as well as their aversion to mass politics.

Whereas deliberative assemblies were arenas to offer calm and deliberative opinions on an issue, the Circle’s members believed political unions threatened to bring too many conflicting opinions together. The \textit{Manchester Guardian} claimed that the ‘vast majority of the middle

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\textsuperscript{107} \textit{Manchester Guardian}, 5 March 1831.  \\
\textsuperscript{108} M. Turner, \textit{British Politics in the Age of Reform} (Manchester, 1999), pp. 170-2.  \\
\textsuperscript{109} Prentice, \textit{Sketches}, p. 368.  \\
\end{flushleft}
classes’ were ‘decidedly unfriendly to the establishment of political unions’, as they saw that ‘no good’ could ‘arise from the establishment of a mock parliament in every corner of the kingdom, existing under no public responsibility, yet debating and acting upon every public question’. They asked, moreover, how a ‘good government’ could possess:

that freedom of action which is essential to its stability and to its calm deliberations for the public welfare, if it be constantly exposed to the organised action, the suggestions, the meddling interferences, the threats of a thousand irresponsible clubs.\(^{112}\)

For the Little Circle, then, the deliberative assembly was an alternative to political unions, and the development of mass political organisation. While the Circle were sincere in their beliefs, their ambivalence towards popular politics and political associations left them poorly equipped to deal with the dramatically changed political context after 1832: an era defined by mighty mass campaigns.

Yet single-issue campaigns such as the Catholic Association’s agitation for Catholic emancipation and the Anti-Slavery movement were clearly an effective means of marshalling popular support and achieving political change, as they sought to transcend various political divisions in the pursuit of a clear and single objective. The Circle recognised that the political unions and Henry Hunt had been successful in shaping opinion on parliamentary reform. The *Manchester Guardian* argued that when the ‘king, the ministers, and the people are united for the accomplishment of a common object, they cannot be long resisted’. But whilst the members of the unions may have been ‘true and unanimous in their allegiance to the bill’, in the future it was possible that another issue could captivate their attention in a different way, meaning that ‘a thousand differences of opinion amongst them will become apparent; and the popular cause will suffer greatly from the means that were intended to advance it’. The *Manchester Guardian*, 5 November 1831.

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\(^{112}\) *Manchester Guardian*, 5 November 1831.
Guardian argued that huge meetings deployed on behalf of mass agitations, like Hunt or the political unions, instigated ‘much fear’ and introduced ‘amongst us, instead of government and order, liberty and law, the ascendancy of absolute democracy’. 113 Although single-issue campaigns could direct popular support towards one objective, the Circle believed that such coalitions were necessarily short-lived and fragile.

Mass political associations, the Circle believed, were not only likely to be ephemeral, but also beyond the control of any individuals, and liable to be taken over by less benign forces. While the likes of Henry Hunt and Thomas Attwood, the charismatic leader of the Birmingham Political Union, might have previously been able to harness and channel opinion, the Circle believed it was likely that their ideas could eventually be superseded and disputed by others.

The Manchester Guardian commented that:

Sound and rational reform has at present, if we are not egregiously mistaken, almost as much to fear from the injudicious zeal of its too ardent and sanguine but honest friends, as from the opposition of its open and avowed enemies, whether they be tories, or that infinitely worse and more dangerous and disgusting faction, the Huntites. 114

Past experience suggested that such political organisations, especially reforming or radical ones, were vulnerable to infiltration by government spies or informers. There was perhaps understandable degree of paranoia about this within the Circle. For example, John Shuttleworth’s scrapbook is full of with articles chronicling instances where spies had been exposed. 115 Hunt accused Richard Potter of sending a letter to Joseph Hume M.P., which suggested that he (Hunt) was a Tory in ‘disguise’, recruited to halt their progress for parliamentary reform. 116

113 Manchester Guardian, 5 November 1831.
114 Ibid.
115 John Shuttleworth Scrapbook, Manchester Archives +, GB.127.BR f324.942733 S3.
116 Manchester Times, 7 May 1831.
The success of the members of the Little Circle in Manchester was determined by their ability to prevent other political groups, such as the PUWC, the MPU and Henry Hunt from gaining too much influence in their town. The Little Circle disassociated themselves from these political groups and their political messages and tactics. Yet this stance appears to have made the Circle particularly unpopular by 1831, and reveals the limitations of their approach to politics. Although the members of the Circle had been earlier characterised as holding ‘popular opinions’ and being men ‘of the people’, by 1831 hisses were heard when their names or newspapers (particularly the *Manchester Guardian*) were mentioned. Members of the Circle and the *Manchester Times* were distinguished in Manchester for their moderate stance on political reform. When other interest groups were demanding universal male suffrage, the Circle only backed more modest ministerial plans. Such a stance evidently made them unpopular public figures in Manchester with working-class groups, who expected far more for parliamentary reform. Richard Potter was considered to be a tepid supporter of political change. In fact, in a meeting staged by Henry Hunt in Manchester in the May of 1831, an effigy of Potter was burnt in full display of the crowd.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}}

As much as the Little Circle wanted to disassociate themselves from the political unions and Henry Hunt, it was not always possible to remain aloof from popular politics or to maintain control in such circumstances. This was notably demonstrated during the Camp Field meeting held in October 1831. Initially, the Circle organised a meeting to be held in the Riding School.\footnote{\textit{Morning Chronicle}, 15 October 1831.} But they soon realised that there were too many participants, and demands were made by some of the 80,000 to 100,000 persons in attendance to relocate to the neighbouring Camp Field. Both the *Manchester Guardian* and Absalom Watkin reported that this was a
deliberate ploy by the ‘radicals’ – the PUWC – to disrupt proceedings.\textsuperscript{119} Thomas Potter accordingly was called upon to chair the meeting, where Watkin observed that he and Shuttleworth were publicly forced into calling for a reform bill including annual parliaments, vote by ballot, and universal suffrage.\textsuperscript{120} By moving to an open field the Little Circle lost control. In such an environment, and with too many participants in attendance, the members of the Little Circle found themselves forced into a corner. The experience taught the Little Circle that outdoor meetings provided the setting for different interest groups to take control and determine a response from their town towards a particular political issue. The number of participants rather than the quality of the discussion carried forward a political agenda. In a later meeting, organised on 13 October 1831, held in the Town Hall and chaired by the future MP of Manchester Mark Philips, a resolution was passed alluding to the ‘very difficult circumstances’ in which Thomas Potter found himself in as chairman of the Camp Field meeting. In the view of the Circle, the events of Camp Field had ‘no connection with any other meeting’.\textsuperscript{121}

In May 1832 the Whig government resigned, after a ‘wrecking amendment’ to the third English reform bill was passed by a majority in the House of Lords. The country was effectively left without a government. After the Duke of Wellington’s attempt to form a caretaker administration to carry a reform measure failed, the Whigs were reinstated, backed with a pledge from William IV to create enough peers to pass the bill through the Lords. This threat proved sufficient to force the Lords to retreat.\textsuperscript{122} In this fast-moving political situation of May 1832, however, when the country appeared, but according to historians was not actually, on

\textsuperscript{119} Manchester Guardian, 15 October 1831; Watkin, Journal, p. 162
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid, p. 162.
\textsuperscript{121} Borough Reeve’s records relating to public meetings in Manchester, Archives+ Manchester, M91/33/1, f.111-112.
\textsuperscript{122}I. Newbould, Whiggery and Reform, 1830-41: The Politics of Government (Basingstoke, 1990), pp. 75-7.
the brink of revolution, the members of the Circle contemplated more direct action.\textsuperscript{123} Their political agitation had already become more forceful in the year leading up to the passing of the Reform Bill in June 1832.\textsuperscript{124} During a meeting to discuss parliamentary reform (September 1831), John Shuttleworth declared that Manchester might someday employ a ‘system of passive counteraction’: by which he meant non-compliance of paying taxes and levying of goods. ‘These are the means which are yet to use in reserve’, Shuttleworth proclaimed, ‘for us every constitutional and peaceable meeting ought to be not taken to avert consequences, which we … have not the nerve to contemplate’.\textsuperscript{125} While the Little Circle might have supported the ministerial plan of reform, they also prepared themselves for an eventuality where more controversial tactics could be harnessed. In this setting, they also began to speculate on the possibilities of disruption and potential violent outbreaks if a measure of parliamentary reform was not passed.\textsuperscript{126}

Publicly raising the possibility of other political tactics shows how the Circle’s members were prepared to abandon the centrality of deliberative assemblies to achieve their aims, and expressing such views also served notice to anti-reformers.\textsuperscript{127} During May 1832, the members of the Circle wanted to demonstrate that their current political context had taken them out of their previous political comfort zone and forced them to contemplate using tactics: such as the non-payment of taxes and the use of reform associations with working-class memberships. In the heat of the ‘days of May’, as they have been called, the Little Circle also attended preliminary meetings at the York Hotel to discuss a possible formation of a cross-class Reform

The fact that the Circle contemplated forming a union at all, showed that they were, to all intents and purposes, prepared to abandon the political approach that had defined them in the past. But as Navickas has pointed out, the aim of reformers was the ‘reform not the destruction of the political system’. The members of the Little Circle might have threatened to use different tactics, but arguably it was never their intention to use popular models of political action, and may be interpreted as a bluff. Members of the Circle were reluctant to use anything other than petitions and indoor public meetings. Even so, the political situation in 1832 forced their hand, and they wanted to create the impression that they were about to try a more radical course of action.

Nevertheless, even between 1830 to 1832 the Little Circle’s members continued using the forum of the deliberative assembly to ask for parliamentary reform. The fact that passive counteraction was once again threatened in a ‘highly respectable’ meeting, which was held on 12 May 1832 in the town hall, where ‘mechanics, manufacturers, and others’ had simultaneously assembled together, indicated that the Circle were reluctant to use such tactics. The fact this meeting was carefully planned for the morning, so that it would not be disturbed by any unwanted influences, further highlighted that the Circle wanted to exclude working people from attending. It was recorded by the Manchester Times that it was only by one or two o’clock that placards could be displayed, and petitions laid out for signature supporting passive counteraction. The Manchester Times commented that, had the petition ‘been put out at a time of day when the working classes was at leisure’, it was possible that they would have received a considerably higher number of attendants. Even though the Circle were experimenting with the possibility of using more aggressive mass mobilisation tactics, they proceeded in a limited

128 Watkin, Journal, p. 162
129 Navickas, Politics of Space, p. 128.
130 Manchester Times, 12 May 1832.
way. Ultimately, the Circle’s threat that Manchester would withhold taxes until reform was enacted was not needed, as the Whigs resumed political office.

Despite the resolutions passed at this meeting on 12 May 1832, many in Manchester still felt the Reform Bill was not extensive enough. The *Manchester Times* reported that placards were raised and distributed, which advanced the idea of withholding supplies, as well as advocating the boycott of certain products such as tea and tobacco. Crucially, though, these placards also demanded that Parliament offer them ‘something more than the Bill’. An initial resolution of the meeting held on 12 May 1832 was to hold a town hall meeting ‘everyday’. However, the next meeting, held on 19 May, was also held in St Peter’s Field – the symbolic site of the events of Peterloo (1819) – and not the town hall as previously stipulated. An estimated 40,000 people were in attendance at this meeting. The *Manchester Times* reported that it felt like the ‘whole town’ was in attendance.

While their past experience made the members of the Circle uncomfortable with open air meetings, the meeting held in St Peter’s Field was an opportunity to encourage their town to place faith in a deputation that was currently on its way to London. This deputation, which included Richard Potter and John Shuttleworth, was put together at meeting held in Manchester on 12 May. Potter and Shuttleworth planned to journey all the way to Westminster through various towns and villages. In these towns and villages, the deputation sought to explain Manchester’s reasoning behind withholding taxes. Unlike indoor public meetings that were designed to demonstrate the rational and deliberative capacity of a bourgeois public, the Circle’s attendance at St Peter’s Field was an attempt to appease and pacify the general

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131 Ibid.
132 *Manchester Times*, 19 May 1832.
population of their town. Both Harvey and Thomas Potter were able to reinforce how important it was for Manchester to get behind both the deputation and the Reform Bill. Harvey remonstrated with the crowd that he believed it was important to support Earl Grey, who he believed offered the ‘people’ a ‘cheap government’. Instead their animosity should be directed towards the ‘faction’ of ‘boroughmongers’, who taxed them £4 million a year, and were only interested in maintaining the status quo.\textsuperscript{133} Harvey and Potter’s participation in this meeting facilitated an agreeable outcome. Although members of the Circle had been uncomfortable with outdoor meetings, through the reform agitation they had developed greater confidence in their own ability to address larger audiences.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has shown that meetings that were officially convened by a local official, held in a town building, and recorded in the press, were regarded as the legitimate setting in which the Little Circle’s members felt public opinion could be properly articulated and expressed. These meetings were forums that claimed they could bring conflicting ideas and interests together through a calm, rational and deliberative discussion. In order to facilitate this deliberative discussion, the Little Circle believed that it was necessary to create the optimum climate for it. The outcomes of deliberative assemblies were designed, in the Circle’s estimation, to embolden and encourage ministers to follow a particular course of action. A calm and deliberative discussion, recorded in the newspaper, demonstrated how their town could intelligently form decisions on important political topics of the day.

Furthermore, this study has shown that these same assemblies were forums where a self-styled intelligent and rational public comprised out of the Manchester population could come together

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.
to represent their political ideas and interests. In practice though these meetings were forums that brought a male, middle-class public together in Manchester to decide on the language and response required to tackle various political issues of the day. The members of the Little Circle believed that the resolutions and agreements made in deliberative assemblies, composed of a bourgeois and male public, represented the considered and settled opinions of their town. Although historians of the early nineteenth century have clearly demonstrated the prevalence and centrality of mass platform meetings and tactics in this period, the deliberative assembly has been overlooked. The mass platform meetings of Henry Hunt and the political unions found strength in numbers and visibly illustrated their political agendas were well supported. But these meetings, from the perspective of the Circle, did not epitomise the considered and settled opinions of the entire meeting. Instead, these meetings highlighted how well supported a particular speaker’s ideas were received. Whereas the Little Circle said that their meetings encouraged debate and deliberation, and sought out compromises, mass platform orators, such as Hunt, were regarded as being obstinate and dogmatic in their views. In effect, mass platform meetings only presented the opinions of one individual speaker, rather than the unanimous opinions of an entire town.

Members of the Little Circle felt that mass platform meetings had the potential to misrepresent opinion, and force resolutions through as a result of intimidation and fear of violence. In the Circle’s estimation, these were not rational forums, where a considered and intelligent segment of the town could engage with one another, and come to an arrangement on how to proceed and act on a certain political question. Conducting their meetings at certain times of the day and convened in rooms within limited space for participants, meant that these deliberative assemblies only came to represent the settled opinions of a fraction of the population of Manchester. Although ‘working-class’ individuals were not restricted from gaining access to
these meetings, they were structured and organised in such a way where the ideas and interests of individuals, such as the Circle, were prioritised.

Only in the month leading up to the eventual passage of the Reform Act did the Circle choose to engage in a meeting set outdoors. However, this choice did not reflect an abandonment of their previous tactics. Rather, their attendance at a meeting in St Peter’s Field was an opportunity to speak to an audience who were growing restless and threatening the use of more assertive tactics. Speaking to this crowd, in a setting within which the Circle were uncomfortable, highlighted how they were prepared to utilise different tactics when needed, although they were reluctant to do so. Whilst the forum of a small deliberative assembly helped shape and articulate particular resolutions on a political issue in a calm and rational debate, in 1832 the Circle realised that they had to engage with a different audience. This was not a deliberative assembly to formalise a particular course of action. Instead, it was a chance to try and encourage a mass audience to commit themselves and trust the resolutions and actions proposed and agreed at a previous meeting – which had been a smaller deliberative assembly.
This chapter argues that the members of Little Circle’s preferred method of marshalling public opinion – using indoor deliberative assemblies – was less effective between 1832 and 1846. The locus for the formation of middle-class public opinion shifted to partisan forums or those necessitating more formalised and permanent organisational structures, as in the case of single-issue campaigns. Although the Circle became part of a politically dominant liberal and middle-class elite in Manchester, they found that their ability to speak for the entire town had diminished. A rise in political partisanship in Manchester, combined with increasingly bitter divisions over religious issues, made it harder to represent the collective expression of public opinion. The changed political context in Manchester after the 1832 Reform Act was reflected in two important developments that had serious implications for the Little Circle and their political practice. Firstly, increased partisanship encouraged different political factions in Manchester to hold their own ticketed meetings to preach to the converted rather than engage people harbouring opposing political opinions, and indeed, the wider community. Secondly, extra-parliamentary politics increasingly sought to mobilise popular support, including appealing to a working-class audience, on an ever-larger scale.

James Vernon has argued that after 1832 ‘the public political sphere’ was defined in an ‘increasingly restrictive and exclusive fashion’.\(^1\) Certainly, extra-parliamentary politics in Manchester exhibited marked changes after 1832, but not all of these developments can be regarded as stifling popular participation or being exclusionary. The way extra-parliamentary politics was conducted in Manchester after 1832 represented a complete contrast to the way it was managed before the passage of the Reform Act. While public meetings continued, there

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were fewer examples of the small, select deliberative assemblies favoured by the Circle. This chapter analyses these developments to highlight shifts within Manchester’s political culture. The Circle’s style of politics and the premises upon which it was based were increasingly redundant in the post-reform context, in which fierce partisanship and mass campaigning set the tone for much of the growth of mass popular politics.\(^2\) This period was fast-paced politically in terms of the number and frequency of elections in a town that had little previous experience of them. Parliamentary elections were held in 1832, 1835, 1837 and 1841, and there was a by-election in 1839. The Municipal Corporations Act (1835) was adopted in municipal boroughs like Birmingham and Manchester after contentious petition campaigns for incorporation.\(^3\) A result of Manchester’s incorporation as a municipal borough, after the inaugural Town Council elections in 1838, was that a third of municipal seats were contested annually.

The traditional sources of local political power and authority eroded after 1832 in consequence of these institutional changes. The political opinions of a small, bourgeois male public, who were now enfranchised as parliamentary electors under the £10 householder franchise, were represented through the two MPs for Manchester. This development meant that it was no longer essential to hold indoor public meetings to represent the interests and opinions of this same group. Rather than speaking in the town’s name through public meetings, the Circle and other middle-class groups shifted their attention to electoral politics at the parliamentary, and after 1838, municipal level. Issues of representation were thus increasingly channelled through ballots and voting rather than public meetings. At the same time, another political development was the growth of mass, organised single-issue campaigning: a shift represented by the mighty,


Manchester-based Anti-Corn Law League. Such agitations, although middle-class led, sought to mobilise a broad, diverse, mass coalitions to exert pressure on Parliament and aristocratic politicians. While equally resistant to working-class radicalism as the Circle, the League was much more comfortable with the role of political organisation, agitation, and sometimes rowdy popular politics, all of which enabled it to work on a much larger scale than that contemplated by the members of the Circle.\(^4\) Although it was more difficult to construct a legitimate and coherent public voice after 1832 in Manchester, political success could be achieved through mass popular tactics.\(^5\)

In charting important developments in Manchester’s political culture, this chapter contributes to wider debates about post-reform politics. Historians of national politics have emphasised the significance of divisions between as well as within the parties, at both parliamentary and local level, after 1832. As Boyd Hilton has argued, divisions between the Tory/Conservative and Whig/Liberal parties were mainly over religious and constitutional issues, but both sides were internally divided on social and economic issues such as the new poor law or factory regulation.\(^6\) While historians have clearly shown that a ‘Liberal’ party was being formed in the 1830s and 1840s, it was one that was loose, broad and fluid, and the intellectual context was that the idea of being a ‘liberal’ was a flexible concept, rather than the label for a disciplined,


organised party as it became in the later nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{7} As Angus Hawkins has noted, between 1832 to 1867, to ‘speak of a two party-alignment … is a shorthand for, on the one side, an often very fragile alliance of Whigs, radicals and Irish’.\textsuperscript{8} The members of the Little Circle were one liberal group amongst many others in Manchester, who tended to coalesce around the same political, religious and social campaigns. Another label used in this chapter is Conservative, which Sir Robert Peel adopted in his Tamworth Manifesto of 1834 to replace the older term Tory.\textsuperscript{9} When Liberals are referred to in this chapter with a capital letter, it will be in reference to the coalition of politicians in Parliament, whereas when the lower case is used, it will to refer to the broader constituency of liberals outside Westminster.

Members of the Circle accepted that there was a need to organize themselves through political associations: specifically, Reform Associations and the Anti-Corn Law Association.\textsuperscript{10} This was even though the Little Circle and their allies had a track record of rejecting the need for such associations, based on their belief that associations compelled people to adopt a singular line of thought. However, this view became increasingly hard to maintain in the light of political developments. In particular, the Conservatives demonstrated the effectiveness of local party associations to register voters for parliamentary elections annually, and such bodies proliferated across England. As Philip Salmon has noted, in the first two years after reform,

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\textsuperscript{9} After 1834, Conservative is used instead of Tory in the analysis.
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Conservatives instituted fifteen registration associations in the boroughs and eleven in the county divisions.\textsuperscript{11}

Finally, this chapter contributes to deepening understandings of the changes in political culture in the 1830s and 1840s, particularly the shifting functions of local political meetings and dinners. Peter Brett has shown that by the 1830s and 1840s, middle-class liberal and conservative politicians utilized dinners to foster a sense of unity and co-operation.\textsuperscript{12} This chapter argues that this sense of unity helped foster a sense of partisanship in towns such as Manchester in the 1830s and 1840s. However, Janette Martin has noted that during the 1830s and early 1840s most political oratory was conducted in front of these small and indoor public meetings or lectures. Martin emphasised that these public meetings were a ‘democratic sphere where ideas could be freely raised, contested and public opinion formed’. For the ‘disenfranchised’ the public meeting was ‘an important democratic space where truth could be elucidated and public opinion measured’. A ‘properly functioning public meeting could be remarkably democratic and representative of all shades of opinion’.\textsuperscript{13} Instead, this chapter demonstrates that ticketed public meetings in this period rarely incorporated individuals expressing radically different thoughts and opinions from one another.\textsuperscript{14} Public meetings, then, were increasingly shaped by the emergence of partisanship rather than operating in a separate sphere.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{11} Salmon, \textit{Electoral Reform at Work}, p. 58.
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This chapter begins in 1832 and ends in 1846 as these dates conveniently bookend achievements of two of the Circle’s key aims: parliamentary reform and the repeal of the Corn Laws. Over this period the Circle sought to adjust their political practice in the light of changes in the culture of extra-parliamentary politics. In order to highlight this change over time, this chapter will use various newspapers, chiefly the Manchester Times and Manchester Guardian, personal papers, letters from members of the Anti-Corn Law movement, and the official papers of the Boroughreeve. The Manchester Times and Manchester Guardian are especially important, because quite apart from regularly reporting on the political activities of the members of the Circle in Manchester and its neighbouring towns, they were also important barometers of middle-class and liberal thinking in this period.

This chapter is split into five sections. The first section of this study will examine the Circle’s response to 1832 Reform Act and the growth of partisanship in Manchester after 1832, and demonstrate the extent to which the Circle were uncomfortable with partisan popular politics. Despite their reservations towards partisanship, the members of the Circle capitalised on the political situation in Manchester and helped construct a successful and dominant liberal hierarchy in their town. The second section of this chapter develops this idea further by showing how a further consequence of political changes associated with reform, both parliamentary and municipal, was the weakening of the traditional authorities in Manchester. A corollary of this was that public meetings declined, which were convened by local officials such as the Boroughreeve. In the third section of this chapter I emphasise how a partisan divide was exacerbated in Manchester by the establishment of the Town Council. Importantly, this section will argue that there was a divide that made it more difficult to articulate a coherent expression of public opinion in Manchester. Fourthly, by focusing on political associations and
dinners this chapter will argue that the members of the Circle began to adopt political tactics and forums towards which they had hitherto expressed reservations.

A main reason why middle-class liberals such as the Circle adopted the use of associations was because they wanted to craft a sense of unity and common political purpose. While the Circle’s means had changed, their ends remained the same. This was also evident in the way liberals such as the Circle began to harness mass popular political tools such as mass petitioning and mass meetings in the 1840s. Unity and popular support were critical to their understanding of how to achieve political objectives such as the repeal of the Corn Laws. The fifth section of this chapter will reinforce the idea that extra-parliamentary and local politics became more organised and eager to appeal to a more popular and broader constituency. The use of mass popular tactics such as petitioning and public dinners superseded the old formats the members of the Circle had used before 1832. Taken together these sections demonstrate that the members of the Circle were forced to reassess some of their political anxieties towards political associations, mass popular tactics and partisan political activities. To respond to the post-1832 political situation, a different mentality and brand of extra-parliamentary activity was needed.

**After Reform: the growth of partisanship in Manchester**

Before 1832 middle class groups such as the Circle recognised that they were on the fringes of the nation’s formal political processes. However, the 1832 Reform Act explicitly broadened the scope of the political nation, both in terms of which localities were represented and in terms of who could vote at parliamentary elections. Electors in new borough constituencies such as Manchester qualified to vote under the £10 householder franchise and by their gender (the Act explicitly excluded women from voting for the first time). The intention of the franchise clauses and the composition of the new post-reform electorate has been much debated. Dror Wahrman
has argued that the 1832 Reform Act was intended to enfranchise the middle class. Such a view is lent credence by the contemporary critique by working-class radicals that the Whigs and the middle class had betrayed the promise of further franchise extension to the people to secure their own narrow interests.\textsuperscript{15} The increase in the overall electorate disguises the significant disenfranchisement of voters in existing boroughs such as Preston, who were mostly freemen who failed to meet the new ratepaying and residency clauses.\textsuperscript{16}

While the extent to which the franchise was democratic and the electorate was extended continues to be a matter of debate, Salmon has convincingly shown that a major consequence of the Act was an increase in partisan voting patterns and party organisation. The popular conception of what the vote meant shifted from being a trust only conferred on a privileged few to a ‘far more permanent and personal possession, which was defined on a national basis by law’. Annual voter registrations ‘encouraged those who qualified each year to regard themselves as voters, irrespective of whether or not there was an actual election’. Under these conditions, Salmon has shown that local party political organisations worked hard to gather support for their political candidates by taking active and concerted steps to register eligible voters.\textsuperscript{17} Both Salmon and John Phillips have shown through analysis of polling data that electoral behaviour after 1832 became more partisan and persistent, and more linked to national political debates, issues and parties.\textsuperscript{18} While some historians have questioned the validity of


\textsuperscript{17} Salmon, \textit{Electoral Reform at Work}, p. 7.

poll book analysis as anachronistic in emphasising individual preferences and ignoring the social and communal context for voting, it is hard to deny the growth of partisanship after 1832.19

Despite the focus on partisanship and national party alignments in the 1830s, more can be said about the way contemporaries in new constituencies such as Manchester reacted to these developments, particularly outside of election time. The main focus of this section will be directed towards how the 1832 Reform Act catalysed the development of a different brand of liberal and middle-class extra-parliamentary politics and how one influential group reluctantly came to terms with the growth of partisanship in developing their political practice. The electoral culture of Manchester after 1832 was not entirely dominated by increasingly pervasive parties. For example, colours and symbols at elections reflected local diversity and did not necessarily correlate with national party colours.20 Brotherton for example adopted the colour green in his political campaigns, and his supporters utilised green flags to exhibit their allegiance to him.21 Manchester MPs like Mark Philips and Charles Poulett Thomson, both liberals, sported light blue and scarlet colours, respectively.22 In Wigan however Richard Potter and his supporters did not flaunt flags of any colour except for a flag stating ‘Potter and Purity of Election’.23

Yet in other respects, in terms of the press, the development of party organisation, registration battles, and elections, the growth of partisanship in Manchester’s political culture is clear. The

20 Vernon, Politics and People, pp. 163-4.
21 Manchester Times, 29 July 1837.
23 Manchester Guardian, 26 July 1837.
press in Manchester, as elsewhere, were key agents in generating partisanship, reporting on party events, dinners, offering editorial comment on national and local politics, and encouraging readers to register as electors, and vote. However, at times, newspapers expressed residual criticism of partisanship, reflecting the continued influence of pre-1832 thinking. For example, in the mid-1830s both the *Manchester Times* and the *Manchester Guardian* complained that party spirit caused ‘bitterness’ and forced people to adopt a group mentality rather than allowing everyman to keep ‘his own counsel’. More typical, though, was the statement shortly before the 1835 general election by the *Manchester Times* that urged their readership that it was crucial for them to register as electors in order to return liberal candidates to their constituency. In a similar vein, in 1841 the same paper implored their readers to ‘REGISTER! REGISTER! REGISTER!’ on ‘THIS DAY’ of its publication and that those who did not would be sure to ‘regret their apathy’. Such advice was naturally mirrored by Conservative newspapers such as the *Manchester Courier* who, addressing their readership, offered ‘to quote and lay before them guidance’ on the subject of registration.

Newspapers then as now implored readers to vote for particular candidates, and as Mancunian voters had two votes at parliamentary elections, electors were advised to avoid splitting votes across candidates of different parties. As the *Manchester Times* counselled, there should be ‘no divisions take place that may tend to serve a Tory candidate’. Ahead of the 1835 general election, *Manchester Guardian* made the same point, addressing ‘every liberal elector within the compass of our circulation, we currently appeal for him to be prompt and decisive in his cause, to vote, for no tory’.

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24 *Manchester Guardian*, 20 December 1834; *Manchester Times*, 28 March 1835.
25 *Manchester Times*, 31 January 1835.
26 *Manchester Times*, 20 July 1841.
27 *Manchester Courier*, 20 June 1840.
28 *Manchester Times*, 12 July 1834.
29 *Manchester Guardian*, 3 January 1835.
candidate fighting for one of the two seats), meant that newspapers frequently reiterated the need for electors to vote in a united and partisan way.

A further sign of the growth of partisanship, both nationally and locally, was the spread of party associations across Britain, and particularly England, after 1835. The local foundation of such associations took their cue from developments in Westminster. Matthew Cragoe has argued that it was clear that ‘national issues and national party political alignments mattered at the grassroots level in the 1830s’ and that party associations were a key mechanism for connecting local politics with national party politics.\(^{30}\) In May 1835, a significant group of approximately two hundred ‘liberal Members of the House of Commons’ and other leaders of ‘the country liberal party’ met at the British Coffee House in London to discuss the means to ‘insure the full registration of the liberal party’. Prominent liberal figures such as Lord Ebrington, the prominent Whig Reformer and future Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Joseph Hume MP, and the proprietor of the national *Sunday Times*, Daniel Whittle Harvey, were amongst the names to sign up to this ‘Great Reform Association’ initiative, which led to the foundation of the Reform Club to combat the Conservative Carlton Club, which had been established in 1832. Founder members of the Reform Club included Lord Durham, Sir William Molesworth, the election agent Joseph Parkes, Joseph Hume, and George Grote, the political radical and historian. The Great Reform Association was intended to copy the Conservatives use of the Carlton Club as a tool for electoral management.\(^{31}\)

Following these national initiatives, local party associations were established across many constituencies, including Manchester and Salford.\(^{32}\) In Manchester’s nearby towns and

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\(^{32}\) *Manchester Times*, 31 June 1835.
neighbourhoods such as Salford, Hulme and Ardwick, Reform Associations were active and helped organise public dinners to support candidates such as Brotherton and Mark Philips in forthcoming elections. While Manchester had a Reform Association it was initially not prominent in local political life. During a dinner to demonstrate political support for Brotherton, that was organised by the Salford Reform Association, John Potter (who was the son of Thomas Potter), criticised the fact that most people in Manchester were ‘too engaged in commercial speculations’. Potter feared that ‘there was not sufficient importance attached to reform associations’ and that ‘we must bear in mind that every good measure which had yet been carried had been obtained by the “pressure from without”’. By 1840 though Manchester’s Reform Association took a more active role and organised meetings to support political candidates such as Thomas Milner-Gibson, the prospective MP for Manchester. Aside from organising meetings, the Manchester Reform Association also occupied a physical space when it established its own office. This office was a place where people could collect their forms to register their right to vote. The impact of these party associations in the practice of the Circle is discussed later in the chapter. Here though the formation of party associations is noted as evidence of the growth of partisanship.

The main purpose of such associations was to enrol supporters, and get opponents struck off, the electoral register. After 1832 voters were registered annually, rather than at election time. Eligible voters were expected to register at the beginning on 20 June. These lists were then scrutinised by revising barristers who would decipher and either accept or object to various names on a variety of different and pedantic reasons surrounding a voter’s property qualifications, residential status, and whether they were up to date with their payments of local taxes.

33 Manchester Times, 2 June 1838; Manchester Times, 7 December 1839; Manchester Times, 14 December 1839; Manchester Times, 28 December 1839.
34 Manchester Times, 8 September 1838.
35 Manchester Times, 23 August 1845.
rates or taxes.\textsuperscript{36} Despite the fact that liberal candidates in Manchester secured the most votes, the \textit{Manchester Guardian} expressed concerns about the processes through which voters were registered. The \textit{Manchester Guardian} reflected that in the ‘tribunals for registration the foundations of the franchise are laid, and, through the defective constitution of those tribunals, the foundations of the franchise are exposed to the errors of ignorance and the working of party spirit’. These barristers were regarded as being more ‘favoured by the judges than employed by the public’.\textsuperscript{37} Additionally, the \textit{Manchester Times} wrote that the periodical ‘assize of the revision barristers furnished matter for serious reflection on several very important subjects’, namely the ‘facility, for instance, with which a political partisan or personal enemy can give notice of objection, without being obliged to give a ground for it whatever’.\textsuperscript{38} As a result of partisan battles over the enrolling of voters, between 1832 and 1839 Manchester’s parliamentary electorate grew exponentially from 6,726 to 12,150.\textsuperscript{39}

Figures 4.1 and 4.2 demonstrate the number of people who voted in favour of Liberal candidates in the elections of 1832 and 1841. The most prominent Liberal candidates in both elections were Mark Philips and Charles Poulett Thomson in 1832 and Mark Philips and Thomas Milner-Gibson in 1841. But as we can see from Figure 4.1 there were more than two Liberal candidates in this election. Written and produced in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, \textit{McCalmont’s Parliamentary Pollbook British Election Results 1832-1918} projected backwards the relatively stable two-party label system of their own period. In practice though candidates such as Samuel Loyd have been defined by historians such as Vic Gatrell as a Tory, and William Cobbett has been labelled as a radical.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{36} Salmon, \textit{Electoral Reform at Work}, pp. 21-2.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Manchester Guardian}, 11 October 1837.
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Manchester Times}, 17 October 1835.
\textsuperscript{39} Salmon, \textit{Electoral Reform at Work}, p. 259.
While the liberals established an electoral hegemony, the fact that every single election was contested by Tories and their Conservative successors between 1832 and 1841, including four general elections and two by-elections, demonstrates an increasing and sustained level of partisanship. The election results, for example, from 1832 or 1841, indicate that Conservative candidates represented a sizeable minority of local opinion, even if this was not sufficient to
secure their election to Parliament. The by-elections of 1835 and 1839, occasioned by Thomson’s appointment as a government minister and then as Governor-General of Canada, are particularly revealing of partisanship as in these polls. Unlike at general elections, voters had only one vote and were thus forced to vote in a partisan way. They could not, as they could in general elections, ‘split’ their vote between candidates from different parties.41

Not all of the poll data survives from Manchester’s elections in the 1830s and 1840s. However, material is available from the Manchester Courier from two elections in 1832 and 1835 that highlights the level of partisanship present in this constituency. Figures 4.3 and 4.4 clearly demonstrate that in 1832 the bulk of voting was positively skewed towards Thomson and Philips who were the main Liberal candidates in Manchester. This was a pattern that was similarly repeated in the January 1835 election. Whereas 35.4% of voters shared theirs vote between Thomson and Philips in 1832 this figure increased to 45.8% in 1835. Between 1832 and 1835 a further 926 more votes were polled. The fact that there was a 10% increase in votes shared between Philips and Thomson clearly demonstrated that Manchester had become increasingly more partisan in the three years that separated these elections. Importantly, there was also a clear decline in cross-party splits across the two elections. Although there was already a low share of cross-party splits in 1832, this number declined even further in 1835. Evidently, voters in Manchester were not willing to cast their votes for candidates who represented different political parties. Based on Figures 4.3 and 4.4 it is possible to say that voters in Manchester voted in a clear and partisan way in the 1830s.

Table Indicating the Number of Voting Plumps Shares and Splits in the 1832 Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plumps</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philips</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomson</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lloyd</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cobbett</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shared</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thomson-Philips</td>
<td>1657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cobbett-Philips</td>
<td>512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cobbett-Thomson</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lloyd-Cobbett</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lloyd-Thomson</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Splits</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hope-Cobbett</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope-Thomson</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope-Lloyd</td>
<td>781</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope-Philips</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Votes polled</td>
<td>4678</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan votes (plumps + shared)</td>
<td>3375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% partisan</td>
<td>72.14621633</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Manchester Courier*, 22 December 1832.
Table Indicating the Number of voting Plump, Shares and Splits in the January 1835 Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plumps</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philips</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomson</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolseley</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braidley</td>
<td>1254</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shared</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philips-Thomson</td>
<td>2567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomson-Wolseley</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philips-Wolseley</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Splits</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Braidley-Wolseley</td>
<td>376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braidley-Philips</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braidley-Thomson</td>
<td>661</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Votes polled</td>
<td>5604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan votes (plumps + shared)</td>
<td>4314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% partisan</td>
<td><strong>76.980728</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Manchester Courier*, 7 January 1835.

A second key consequence of the Reform Act, for the political culture of Manchester, was that it provided middle-class groups, such as the members of the Circle, with a formal entry into the nation’s electoral process not only as electors, but as candidates and MPs for this constituency. Although before 1832 Circle members could have stood for election in other constituencies if they wished. Joseph Brotherton, who became MP for Salford in 1832, which he represented until his death in 1857, observed that as ‘a public man he had been created by the reform bill’.42 Brotherton was distinguished for his parliamentary career that lasted until his death, where he voted against the 1834 Poor Law and in favour of the repeal of the Corn

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42 *Manchester Guardian*, 21 December 1833.
Laws and municipal reform. Richard Potter represented Wigan from 1832 until 1839. In Parliament Potter voted in favour of the repeal of the Corn Laws and municipal reform and the promotion of civil and religious liberties. Both MPs also supported the secret ballot.\textsuperscript{43} However, unlike Brotherton he voted in favour of the 1834 Poor Law.\textsuperscript{44} Potter also supported the repeal of the clause that prohibited children between the ages of twelve and thirteen from working more than eight hours a day, whilst Brotherton opposed it. Brotherton was in favour of greater factory legislation and a restriction of working hours.\textsuperscript{45} J.B Smith served in Parliament for almost thirty years between 1847 and 1874. Initially, he served as MP for Stirling from 1847 until 1852 and then as the representative for Stockport until 1852. In Parliament Smith formed a vanguard with other Liberal MPs such as Brotherton, Richard Cobden (MP for Stockport), John Bright (MP for Manchester), George Thompson (MP for Tower Hamlets), Lord Dudley Stuart (MP for Marylebone, William Molesworth (MP for Southwark) and Charles Hindley (MP for Ashton-under-Lyne). Turner has commented that these MPs consistently voted for ‘peace, free trade and public retrenchment’.\textsuperscript{46}

The combination of a popular electorate, enfranchisement of new industrialised towns and the opening of Parliament to men from non-elite backgrounds, provided greater opportunities for the Circle to became legislators. Anthony Howe has written of the broader regional context, observing that the Reform Act ‘transformed the political class in Lancashire through the widespread admission of textile masters to the House of Commons’.\textsuperscript{47} Reform, then, potentially gave the Circle a parliamentary platform from which to pursue their liberal agenda, including

\textsuperscript{43} Manchester Times, 4 May 1833.
\textsuperscript{44} Manchester Times, 31 January 1835.
\textsuperscript{47} Howe, The Cotton Masters, p. 95.
the reduction of taxation, the abolition of the Corn Laws and compulsory church rates, and retrenchment in expenditure on the army and navy.\textsuperscript{48} It was hoped, as David Gent has noted, that a reformed Commons could more effectively represent the people who wanted reduced taxation and an end to ‘monopolies’.\textsuperscript{49} However, as this thesis focuses on the political culture of Manchester, it will not examine the Westminster careers of the Little Circle but turn instead to focus on the changing institutional structure within their town.

\textbf{The decline of traditional political institutions in Manchester}

If the growth of political partisanship was one key change in the political context in which the Circle operated after 1832, a second, and equally significant shift was the decline of the traditional, largely Tory-dominated institutions of local government in Manchester. Established local institutions such as the Court Leet, the Vestry and Police Commission continued, for a time, to play an important function within Manchester politics after 1832, particularly before the establishment of the Town Council. However, these institutions were also affected by the political and religious issues and dividing lines that shaped partisanship.\textsuperscript{50} For this reason, it was increasingly difficult to use these institutions, as the Circle had before 1832, as vehicles for harmonising and representing the town’s interests and opinions through deliberative discussion. The divisions between liberals and Tories in Manchester largely reflected the religious conflict between Dissenters and Anglicans. After 1832, Dissenters began to challenge the collection of church rates through the Vestry.\textsuperscript{51} Unsurprisingly, the old political institutions and their Tory-Anglican supporters sought to preserve their powerbase

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Manchester Times}, 2 November 1832.
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Manchester Times}, 31 December 1836; \textit{Manchester Times}, 12 January 1839.
and accordingly opposed the establishment of an elected Town Council in 1838, following municipal incorporation. By contrast, the *Manchester Times* argued that an elected Town Council, that would contain men ‘known to be of liberal opinions’, and open to Dissenters and non-Anglicans would be more inclusive and produce beneficial results. Alongside the Reform Act, municipal reform, as Howe has emphasised, allowed liberal cotton masters to become the ‘pre-eminent’ ‘active citizens’ in towns across south Lancashire.

The decline in Manchester’s established local institutions is demonstrated by the dwindling number of public meetings convened by the Boroughreeve after 1832. As Martin Hewitt has noted, ‘the official “town meeting” declined as it became accepted that in a town such as Manchester, the conventional fiction of the assembly of citizens was wearing rather too thin’. Figure 4.5 demonstrates that there was a rapid decline in public meetings convened by the Boroughreeve after 1832, and in 1835, for example, there is no record of a public meeting called under the aegis of the Boroughreeve at all. The spike in 1837, with ten meetings organised to agitate for the repeal of the cotton tax, is an outlier and unrepresentative of the broader trend. This is shown by the fact that in the following year the number of meetings dropped to just one. After Manchester’s incorporation in 1838, the power to call public meetings passed to the elected Town Council.

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52 *Manchester Times*, 14 January 1837.
Not only did the number of meetings called by the Boroughreeve decline, but this local official was no longer central to Manchester’s political culture. Increasingly public meetings were held without making any attempt to secure the Boroughreeve’s permission, highlighting the growing irrelevance of the Court Leet. For instance, in February 1834 several public meetings around Manchester were organised to demonstrate local support for the enforcement of the observance of the Sabbath day. One meeting was held in Manchester in the Manor Court Room. Only this time the Boroughreeve was asked to attend. But after taking his position as chair he told the audience that was gathered that he would not preside any further over the current meeting. This was because he understood that there had been several meetings organised the night before. Thomas Potter consequently took on the role as chairman of the meeting after being nominated by Edward Baxter.\footnote{\textit{Manchester Times}, 22 February 1834.} In one respect, it could be suggested that the Boroughreeve’s authority for convening public meetings was respected. Yet from another perspective, his authority had

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**Figure 4.5**

Chart Indicating the Frequency of Public Meetings Convened by the Boroughreeve 1832 to 1837.

Source: Data collected from Boroughreeve’s records relating to public meetings in Manchester, Manchester Archives+, M91/33/2.
also been discredited because there were evidently alternative meetings held across the town to support the same issue. Between 1832 and 1838 – when Manchester was granted its first Town Council – we can find numerous examples of public meetings held without seeking the Boroughreeve’s sanction.\textsuperscript{56}

The bitter partisan divide inflected the struggle between the old Court Leet and the establishment of the new Liberal-dominated Town Council. The replacement of the former by the latter did not occur without considerable resistance.\textsuperscript{57} Thomas Potter noted in a Police Commission meeting, held in July 1841, that the ‘design of Municipal Incorporation was to hand over the duties of the commissioners and their servants to the corporation’.\textsuperscript{58} However, an old Tory and Anglican guard who dominated Manchester’s local political institutions before 1838 refused to accept the authority of the new council. The Police Commission duly refused to allow the Town Council use of the Town Hall in Manchester. The \textit{Manchester Times}, writing in October 1838, observed that the Police Commission were the ‘enemies of popular rights’ and that they were ‘now putting forth all their strength to retain a shadow of their power’ by filling the Town Hall ‘with thorough-going Tories, determined to obstruct the law’.\textsuperscript{59}

Chartists in Manchester formed an alliance with local Tories and worked in concert with one another to occupy positions in the Vestry and the Police Commission in the 1830s. Chartists believed liberals who pursued incorporation did not go far enough in their plans to enfranchise the population of their town. The forum of local government, in the Chartist’s eyes, was a

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Manchester Times}, 18 May 1833; \textit{Manchester Times}, 16 February 1833; \textit{Manchester Times}, 9 March 1833; \textit{Manchester Times}, 26 April 1834; 24 \textit{Manchester Times}, May 1834; \textit{Manchester Times}, 9 January 1836; \textit{Manchester Times}, 11 June 1836; \textit{Manchester Times}, 14 January 1837; \textit{Manchester Times}, 13 January 1838.


\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Manchester Courier}, 17 July 1841.

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Manchester Times}, 27 October 1838.
suitable arena to introduce plans for universal suffrage. In 1838 the Chartist and former working-class radical spokesman during the parliamentary reform debates of the early 1830s, Edward Nightingale, unsuccessfully proposed that commissioners be appointed in proportion to each district. Such a plan would have provided more representation to highly populated working-class areas in Manchester. By 1843 though the Police Commissions powers finally passed to the Town Council following an independent investigation led by Sir Charles Shaw. And in 1842 Manchester’s Town Council was formally given its Charter by an act of Parliament. Despite the ways in which the Court Leet, Police Commission and the Churchwardens attempted to subvert the Town Council, it is clear that a power shift was generated in Manchester that eventually replaced the old Tory-dominated political institutions with a Liberal-controlled Town Council.

A partisan divide: the emergence of new liberal political institutions in Manchester

As a result of the growth of partisanship and the waning of the traditional established institutions, during the 1830s and 1840s Manchester lacked neutral and non-partisan forums that allowed people who expressed different ideas and interests to come together and deliberate with one another. This was especially the case after the establishment of the Town Council in 1838, when Thomas Potter was appointed as the first Mayor of Manchester. Gatrell has commented that the middle class in Manchester consolidated, ‘through incorporation’, a ‘narrow hegemony over Manchester politics’, with municipal reform facilitating the ‘apotheosis of the Liberal elite’, who were to rule ‘Manchester until 1857’. Despite the liberal hegemony, many people in Manchester – particularly the old guard of Tory and Anglicans –

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61 Gatrell, ‘Incorporation’, p. 46.
rejected the Town Council and saw it as a narrow and self-serving institution dominated by liberals.

This understanding was effectively summarised in the *Manchester Guardian’s* obituary of Thomas Potter’s son, liberal campaigner and future Mayor, John Potter (1858):

Before his mayoralty, the old party spirit, remaining from the bygone contests for supremacy which had agitated the community from the grant of the parliamentary franchise to Manchester, by the Reform Act of 1832, and which had to some extent been revivified by the opposition to incorporation of Manchester for the year 1838, still continued to push its barriers into every social circle: till there remained scarcely a spot of neutral ground, on which Whig and Tory, Liberal and Conservative, Corporator and Anti-Corporator, Churchman and Dissenter, could meet in Amity, and-without the slightest compromise of principle, or the laying down a single dogma or their respecting political, theological, or municipal beliefs or opinions - learn, simply by knowing each other better, to entertain a higher mutual respect and esteem.62

Divisions over the legitimacy of Manchester’s old and new political institutions materialised in the parliamentary by-election of September 1839: an election that was held a year after Manchester’s incorporation. In particular, this division revolved around the question over whether the Mayor or the Boroughreeve had a claim to act as the correct arbiters of the nomination process.63 This issue resurfaced a year later when a protestors was removed from a meeting organised in the town hall by the Mayor, Thomas Potter. The protestors stated that he did not acknowledge ‘Mr. Potter’ as the ‘chief magistrate … for the boroughreeve is chief magistrate’.64 Manchester divided into different spheres of partisan political interest that were split between the old institutions of the Court Leet and Town Council. As each rejected one another’s political legitimacy, it became more difficult to construct a public voice that was inclusive and spoke with a real sense of unanimity and coherence.

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62 *Manchester Guardian*, 26 October 1858.
63 *Manchester Times*, 7 September 1839.
64 *Manchester Courier*, 9 May 1840.
The officials of the Town Council, much like the Boroughreeve, had the power to accept or reject requisitions for public meetings. Chapter 3 revealed that before 1832 the Circle had regularly criticised the Boroughreeve and Churchwardens for not calling public meetings on certain issues. Refusing a requisition for a public meeting was a highly political statement. Conservative opponents of the liberal-dominated Town Council publicised such refusals, in the same way the members of the Little Circle had done before 1832, in order to demonstrate the biased and self-serving partisanship of local officials. Now they were in positions of political power and authority, the Little Circle faced criticisms for behaving in a narrow and exclusive, partisan fashion. Thomas Potter, for instance, was accused of ‘accosting a well-known commercial traveller’ during a meeting to elect the Churchwardens in the town hall. It was reported that Potter asked, ‘Have you voted, sir?’ to this traveller. In response, the traveller said he had ‘but not for your party’. Potter then demanded that he should leave, stating that ‘this is our room’.65 When the Mayor, Thomas Potter, convened meetings for the repeal of the Corn Laws, he was criticised by the reformist Spectator for refusing to hold a meeting on the new Poor Law, which working-class radicals opposed, but which middle-class liberals such as the Circle or Anti-Corn Law League generally favoured. As the Spectator concluded, ‘the Mayor’s conduct in calling one meeting and refusing to call the other was partial and unjust’.66 By refusing to convene meetings on issues they did not support, this liberal political elite lent weight to the critique of their opponents that Manchester’s new institutions were partisan and not representative of the whole town.

Internal division and partisan pressures also meant that the Manchester’s Chamber of Commerce, like the Town Council, could not serve as a forum for wider public deliberative

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65 Manchester Courier, 9 May 1840.  
66 The Spectator, 27 March 1841.
discussion and activity. In 1830 the Chamber of Commerce had petitioned in favour of free trade. However, its policy was increasingly criticised as not radical enough by many liberals, including the members of the Circle and Richard Cobden, who increasingly favoured the adoption of immediate and unilateral free trade measures by Britain without reciprocity from other countries. The impasse was broken in December 1838, however, when J.B. Smith and Cobden secured the passage of a resolution for the repeal of the Corn Laws, prompting the resignation of several directors of the Chamber. After this vote, the Chamber shifted to a free trade position in line with the policy of the Anti-Corn Law League, while Conservatives formed the rival Manchester Commercial Association. Partisan divisions were even reflected in the formation of rival trade bodies to represent the commercial interests of the town. After 1832 political divisions were increasingly resolved not through debate, discussion and harmonising opinions in open, public forums, but by one party achieving dominance, whether by supplanting old institutions with new ones, or securing one-party control of existing bodies such as the Chamber. The formation of rival partisan political spheres was not only reflected in institutions but in the sociability and culture of Manchester politics.

Manchester’s fractured political spheres: liberals and political associations

The growth of partisanship in Manchester and the fragmentation of Manchester’s institutions had significant implications for the more informal elements of Manchester’s political culture. This section contributes to deepening existing understandings of popular politics in this period by examining the impact of partisanship on the culture of meetings and dinners after 1832.

68 J.B. Smith, An Authentic Report of the Late Important Discussions in the Manchester Chamber of Commerce, on the Destructive Effects of the Corn Laws upon the Trade and Manufacturing of the Country (Manchester, 1839), pp. 7-9; Chamber Annual Reports, Archives+ Manchester GB127.M8GB127.M8 1828, 1833, 1835, 1836; J.B. Smith, Reports of the Directors to a Special Meeting of the Chamber on the Injurious Effects of Restrictions on Trade, March 11th 1841 (Manchester, 1841); Fraser, Urban Politics, pp. 243-4.
Historians of popular politics have argued that ticketed meetings were an important part of more organised party machinery in the constituencies. While there was a history of partisan dinners or meetings before 1832, such as the Pitt Dinner, after the Reform Act the members of the Circle became regular participants in exclusive, ticketed, partisan events, which represented an important shift in Manchester’s political culture.\(^69\) The growth of ticketed public dinners in Manchester reflected a more divided and stratified public sphere, where different groups segregated themselves into their own partisan political groups.

The appeal of public dinners for the Circle was that it enabled them to speak before a relatively amicable and attentive audience. By inviting a pre-selected audience, the organisers of the meeting had a better chance of ensuring that one side of an argument prevailed. Martin has described how a significant proportion of political meetings organised by liberals in Manchester were little more than set-piece events, designed to play out one side of an argument. Those in attendance rarely shifted their opinions from one point of view to another.\(^70\) Whereas attendees and groups before 1832 claimed, justifiably or not, to represent the town and the wider community, after 1832 they represented themselves and their supporters and not a broader public. This change indicated a wider shift away from the theoretically inclusive politics of the public meeting to a more sectional, partisan and exclusive political culture. Such an understanding chimes with Vernon, who has argued that after 1832 politics in Britain came to be defined in more exclusive and restrictive ways.\(^71\)

A further, related shift, was the adoption of political associations. Liberals such as the members of the Circle were reluctantly drawn to the use of political associations, because they

\(^{69}\) Epstein, ‘Radical Dining’; Brett, ‘Political Dinners in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain’.

\(^{70}\) Martin, *Popular Political Oratory*, pp. 75-120.

\(^{71}\) Vernon, *Politics and People*, p. 9.
recognised that they had been successfully deployed by their political opponents. Importantly, such associations helped foster a sense of unanimity and clear political direction. Conservatives had been effective across the country through their use of associations to facilitate electoral registration and also recruit working-class non-electors. Members of the Circle argued that these Conservative associations represented the fraudulent and self-interested manoeuvrings of an aristocratic elite. Speaking at a ‘Great Dinner’ held in his honour, Brotherton suggested that ‘when bad men combine, good men must associate’. Brotherton drew a distinction between a voluntary association, and a combination, which implied some private, secretive conspiracy against the public. Furthermore, Richard Potter said, in a letter to Joseph Hume M.P., that: ‘it has often occurred to me lately that the liberal members ought to form a bond of union so that they may act together for the public good. The Tories have their clubs, Conservative Associations and success in many instances has followed their efforts’. In a similar vein, concluding a speech he gave to the Salford Reform Association in 1838, Brotherton declared that it was vital to promote ‘unity’ amongst all grades of reformers and that this phrase must ‘be the watchword’ of their cause. Only with ‘unity’, Brotherton continued, could things be accomplished ‘that we desire’.

The main factor compelling members of the Circle to adopt the idea of the association was the success of the Conservatives. Some liberals continued to express misgivings. During a private meeting to discuss future tactics to achieve a repeal of the Corn Laws, Mark Philips ‘stated that had it been the object of the meeting to form an association, he should have declined’. In his mind ‘he thought he should be doing himself a disservice to the cause, and should be binding

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73 Manchester Guardian, 9 September 1837.
75 Ibid.
himself unconditionally to the resolutions which such an association might pass’. As an MP, Philips was particularly sensitive that associations would encroach on his freedom of action, and imply he was the delegate of a party body rather than a representative of the public. Generally, however, Manchester liberals thought that their party needed more cohesion and organisation. As the *Manchester Times* put it, the liberals ‘ought, if tories assume power, to gird up their loins, and sternly wait the contest in the attitude which won the reform bill’. A ‘leaf should be taken from the enemy’s book’, for the time ‘may come for the settlement of their [i.e. liberals’] mutual differences, but it is not when the common enemy is at their door’. The *Manchester Guardian*, after rehearsing the traditional liberal objections to associations, concluded that the example of the Conservatives ‘was sufficient to induce us to recommend or to take part in the formation of any similar society amongst the reformers, plainly defensive though it would have been’.

Aside from registration work, political associations were used to raise funds and support candidates. Procuring funds and raising subscriptions was an aspect of politics the Circle found frustrating, particularly Thomas Potter who said that he ‘had taken a great deal of pains, and spent a great deal of money, in the discharge of what he conceived [as] his public duties’.

Financial support was a critical aspect of politics. Salford’s Reform Association which was led by the Circle member William Harvey, who acted as Brotherton’s election agent, and Thomas Potter, helped raise over £7000 to support a court case contested by the Conservatives in Salford, which challenged Brotherton’s victory. Reflecting on his election, Brotherton asked where ‘is the man whose friends would raise him £6000 to £7000 to defend his seat’?

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76 *Manchester Guardian*, 1 February 1834.
77 *Manchester Times*, 26 December 1835.
78 *Manchester Guardian*, 20 June 1835.
80 *Manchester Guardian*, 29 July 1837.
adequate financial assistance from the Salford Reform Association, Brotherton’s election might have been successfully disputed in court. Although the members of the Circle had reservations about the presence of money in politics, they also accepted that it was a necessary element of political life. Circle members such as Thomas Potter were well-placed to use their own deep pockets to further their political objectives.

Political associations were utilised by the Circle as vehicles to unite local liberals and counter the activity of their Conservative rivals. However, political associations were also used by middle-class liberals to appeal to a more diverse social base in Manchester. Members of the Circle attended associations and dinners specifically catered to the working class in their town. This was a significant shift from the Circle’s pre-1832 practice. As we have seen in chapter 3, Thomas Potter’s experience of being forced to address a largely working-class audience at the Camp Field reform meeting in 1831, prompted him to declare that he no longer wanted to engage with public business.\(^81\) However, the post-1832 extra-parliamentary political climate encouraged groups such as the Circle to reassess the way they approached and managed to work alongside the working classes. Ancillary operative Conservative societies, as well as operative reform associations, historians have shown, were critical elements of the extra-parliamentary political culture within the constituencies.\(^82\) Influential and prominent political figures such as the Circle used these new associations and other mechanisms as vehicles through which to engage with working-class audiences. Not only did the use of associations represent a dramatic change in the way liberals in Manchester thought about political

\(^{81}\) Watkin, *Journal*, p. 162.

organisation, it also represented a complete change in the way they approached the working class. After 1832, the Circle sought to engage a broader, and more diverse audience.

While the members of the Little Circle largely attended political meetings that were specifically designed and organised to accommodate a small and rational public before 1832, after this date they began to attend meetings that appeared to appeal to a much wider constituency. This broader public was not just composed of the wealthy and middle-class elements of Manchester. Rather the Circle appeared specifically to target the working classes directly to gain their support. One of the ‘greatest displays of strength which the reformers had made’ occurred in January 1838 during an operative dinner held in Heywood – a neighbouring town of Manchester.83 This dinner, which was attended by Richard and Thomas Potter, was designed to present an ostensible display of the working-class commitment and support for the ‘liberal magistrates of the county’. Thomas Potter said that he was ‘probably one of the oldest reformers in the room’, and that he had ‘at all times espoused the cause of his humbler brethren of the working-classes’. It was his hope, Potter said, that dinners such as the one in Heywood would help dissuade the ‘working-classes’ from being ‘humbugged’ by the ‘Tories’, and that instead they would rally their support behind liberal candidates.84

Political associations gave greater structure to collective discussion and ensured that such activity was followed by action. While the Little Circle respected the idea that public meetings should be forums for a free and deliberative exchange of ideas, they also understood that political debate for its own sake was unproductive and potentially politically damaging as well. In particular, the partisan context shaped how members of the Circle reassessed the purpose

83 Manchester Times, 14 January 1838.
84 Ibid.
and role of deliberative debates. If such discussions promoted division without resolution, the only beneficiaries were likely to be the Circle’s political opponents. As Brotherton said during a public dinner held for him in 1837, he ‘was one of those who were extremely anxious that all classes of reformers should be united in the great cause … as a radical reformer, [while] the whigs did not go to the extent which he did, he was never fond of fighting against his friends’.85 Above all, the Manchester Times declared, ‘let us have no divisions in the reform camp’.86

Liberals such as the members of the Circle were aware that these differences in opinion between practical reformers, Whigs and radicals obstructed the development of a united and coherent liberal political venture. This was an understanding that was clearly expressed in an article appearing in the Manchester Times, which was entitled ‘the lamentable effects of disunion among the liberals’. Using the medium of a story, the article demonstrated that when Whigs, radicals and reformers argued with one another, the Tories were able to take the political initiative and successfully assert their own agenda.87 The lesson taken from this story, was that liberals had to find common ground with one another, to avoid giving their opponents a political advantage.

Despite this increasing awareness of the problems of disunity and division in a partisan context, liberals were often criticised for the way they failed to reach a degree of cordiality with one another. Often the discussions that took place in ‘liberal’ public meetings drew attention to the inherent frictions and animosities present between its different participants. Reporting on the lack of consensus in ‘liberal meetings’ was a staple feature of the Tory press in the mid to late 1830s. For example, the Manchester Athenaeum, which was inaugurated in 1837 to provide

85 Manchester Times, 28 October 1837.
86 Manchester Times, 31 October 1835.
87 Manchester Times, 20 October 1833.
the middle-class youth of the town opportunities to build their knowledge and sense of ‘community spirit’, was another arena that exposed tensions and the lack of unanimity present among the liberals in Manchester. On another occasion, the Manchester Courier reported on how a ‘Whig meeting’ presided over by Thomas Potter, Mark Phillips, MP and R.H. Greg failed to ‘agree upon a declaration of their principles’. In conclusion, the reporter stated how ‘angry discussion … were the order of the day’ and that in the Manchester Courier’s opinion this was ‘an early symptom of the “union” amongst “Reformers”…which we anticipate’.

Before 1832, the Circle argued that political differences would be harmonised through discussion, consensus and achieving unanimity. After 1832, liberals increasingly argued that the way to resolve debate and differences of opinion was not through consensus or unanimity but through majoritarianism. As the Manchester Guardian commented, ‘differences of opinion there must necessarily be; but … the minority will always pay respect to the opinions of the majority’. The Manchester Times commented that there ‘cannot be the slightest doubt that the reform interest is strong enough, if not divided, to carry an election for members of parliament at any time’. In their opinion, the ‘only chance that a tory candidate can possibly have is division in the ranks of reformers, and the great object ought to secure unanimity’. For this reason, there had to be ‘a mutual accommodation and a meeting upon some common point’. Rather than interpreting their discussions and arguments as a strength, Manchester’s liberals wanted to limit the length and nature of political discussion. The Little Circle’s political conduct post-1835 was dominated by a growing realisation that they had to adopt political tactics, notably mass popular politics, towards which they had previously harboured deep

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88 Manchester Courier, 8 March 1838.
89 Manchester Courier, 27 January 1838.
90 Manchester Guardian, 19 December 1838.
91 Manchester Times, 12 September 1840 [Emphasis by Manchester Times].
reservations. As the next section explains, mobilising mass, united popular followings became a central feature of their political conduct in the late 1830s and early 1840s.

**Single-issue mass popular politics and the Little Circle**

The success of single-issue campaigns led by the Anti-Corn Law League and the Anti-Slavery Society, highlighted how a broad coalition of the middle-classes, workers, religious dissenters, women and others combined to secure their political objectives.\(^9^2\) It also showed benefits of political campaigns adopting broader national messages rather than remaining entirely local in focus. Liberals in Manchester therefore began to act within single-issue campaigns that fed into broader national mass politics. Hitherto this chapter has established that the members of the Circle were forced to contemplate using political methods to which they had previously expressed reservations: most notably in the case of party political activity and associations. However, there was also a similar pattern in the Circle’s use of mechanisms pioneered by single-issue campaigns such as the League, in a period that was defined by ‘mass popular political action’.\(^9^3\) Such tactics included, for example, mass petition drives, and mass platform meetings, all of which were used by the Chartists, the League, the factory movement, Anti-Slavery and the Anti-Poor Law movement.\(^9^4\) Nevertheless, members of the Circle and other liberals in Manchester, as we saw in chapter 3, had always been uncomfortable with the idea of engaging and mobilising large audiences. Rather than being the torchbearers of a new generation of liberal reformers, as Michael Turner has argued, the Circle reappraised their

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political practice in the light of the tactics deployed by younger Manchester liberals like Richard Cobden, George Wilson and John Bright. This provides further evidence of the significant transition made by middle-class liberals in Manchester to adapt to the much-changed post-reform political context.

The political situation in Manchester after 1832 was one that the members of the Circle found frustrating and difficult to embrace fully. A younger, more assertive generation, personified by Cobden and Bright, were more evangelical and more comfortable with mass politics and the methods required to be effective within such a context. Mass popular politics, notably the mass platform, had been regarded by the members of the Circle as forums for demagogues to excite a large audience into adopting a singular line of political thought. The *Manchester Guardian* said that it was a ‘well-known fact that virulence and vulgar personalities of the radical orators’, for ‘some years past’, had been ‘driving almost every clever person away from public meetings, who were not, as it were, compelled as one’. The *Manchester Guardian* observed in 1838 that their fellow townsmen ‘must know well the futility of attempting to convene a deliberative assembly on any such subject, in the midst of so excitable, and as regards to the masses, so uneducated a population as ours’.

Petitions rather than public meetings now seemed to be the best way to express public opinion. Of course, before 1832 most public meetings the Circle had been involved with had culminated with some petition or subscriptional (i.e. name signing) document. But after 1832, there was an important shift in which public meetings become regarded as part of the petitioning process, rather than the key forum for constituting and articulating public opinion. This change partly

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95 Turner, *Reform and Respectability.*
96 *Manchester Times*, 5 October 1833.
97 *Manchester Guardian*, 24 January 1838.
reflected the Circle’s disillusion with public meetings on a larger scale. By 1838 the *Manchester Guardian* complained that the majority of Mancunians were too ‘uneducated’ and ‘excitable’ to take part in a deliberative meeting. While large public meetings, as the Circle found out in Camp Field in 1831, were difficult to control, organisers could remain in control of the petitioning process even when a petition was signed by tens of thousands of people. Members of the Circle had believed that the best way to promote political change was to craft petitions that addressed single issues. Speaking at a public dinner held in his own constituency of Wigan, Richard Potter stated that he believed that the opinions of the country could be secured by ‘supplying the members with petitions’. Potter added that ‘if the country wanted any abuses corrected’ it was essential to ‘petition’. And ‘if done properly’, petitions would ensure that British people would achieve their objectives.98 Petitions signed in a numerously attended public meeting helped demonstrate a sense of common political purpose and unity. For example, in 1842 the Circle attended a meeting organised by the electors of Manchester in order to criticise the proposals for a new income tax. This meeting was seen as an opportunity to ‘unite, as for a common purpose’ the people of Manchester ‘against this tax’.99

Initially, the members of the Circle did not think mass popular politics should be utilised to advance political opinions, preferring instead to look to the long-term project of popular education to enlighten the people. The proliferation of a cheap press and growth of voluntary institutions, such as the Mechanics’ Institute, promoting self-improvement and ‘useful knowledge’ appeared to be advancing popular education.100 The Circle’s views also reflected

98 *Manchester Times*, 19 January 1833.
99 *Manchester Times*, 2 April 1842.
a deeper current in liberal thought, which Alan Kahan has commented, regarded ‘intelligence or education’ as a way of ‘determining political capacity’.

Numerous articles in this period appeared in both the Manchester Guardian and Manchester Times explaining the advantages of a cheap press. Increasing competition for newspapers, by way of making them cheaper, represented one way to reach and educate this wider public. As Jon Klancher has explained, the proliferation of public journals helped create a ‘society of the text’. By reading the same information, a new and united audience was forged, despite the fact that it incorporated people from many different social and economic backgrounds. But at the same time, other rival sources were also increasing their newspaper and periodical production lines. The press was, as Adrian Randall has observed, a ‘vital tool’ that allowed ‘both sides’ to ‘present their case and manipulate opinion’.

However, the Circle’s optimism was tempered by the growing realisation that educational initiatives would take a long time to bear fruit and have an impact on the political system. The Manchester Guardian stated that ‘we must be patient’ and that two or three ‘generations may pass away’ and that the ‘present race of working-men, their sons, and their grandsons may be in their graves before there may be any amendment of the representative system’.

The tension between Chartists and Archibald Prentice, the editor of the Manchester Times and perhaps the most radical member of the Circle, was partly over the pace as well as the nature

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102 Manchester Times, 19 January 1833; Manchester Times, 19 March 1836; Manchester Times, 9 July 1836; Manchester Times, 31 December 1836; Manchester Times, 17 October 1838; Manchester Guardian, 25 October 1834; Manchester Guardian, 3 October 1840.
107 Manchester Times, 28 November 1840.
of political change. The *Manchester Times* suggested that people should be ‘content to wait a while’. But at the public dinner held to propose the foundation of a working-man’s university in Manchester – referred to as the Parthenon – the local Chartist Edward Nightingale highlighted the practical limitations of the Circle’s popular education project by observing that most people in Manchester did not have time to attend lectures or read newspapers such as the *Manchester Times* extensively.

While still committed to promoting popular education for its own sake, the Circle were forced to recognise that it was an ineffective way of achieving political change. Instead, they began to utilise the developing repertoire of mass political tools to speak to and mobilise larger audiences on political issues. The value of the single-issue association, such as the League, was that it could, in theory and temporarily at least, transcend party, class and religious differences that could otherwise impede collective political action. Even though liberal figures such as the Little Circle had long been critics of the Corn Laws, they had done little to organise opinion or pressure on the issue, in contrast to their efforts over parliamentary reform. In 1838 the *Manchester Times* said that they believed ‘what might be thought to be apathy on the part of the merchants and manufacturers of Manchester upon the subject of the Corn Laws, has arisen from there being no organisation for the expression of their opinions’. They looked to the Chamber of Commerce to ‘commence the movement’; however, eventually Prentice realised that a ‘self-contained body, having satisfied itself with a single petition in seven years, seems to have fallen into another seven years’ sleep’. There was a sense therefore that ‘a new association’ had to be formed in Manchester. As a result, nearly one hundred influential people signed their name to inaugurate the Manchester Anti-Corn Law Association.

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108 *Manchester Times*, 17 January 1835.
109 *Manchester Guardian*, 3 October 1838.
110 *Manchester Times*, 6 October 1838.
However, the path to the formation of the Association had not been a straightforward one. Much like the formation of political unions, the members of the Circle and their allies had expressed doubts about creating a political association. For example, in February 1834, several members of the Circle attended a private meeting convened by circulars. This ‘meeting of merchants, manufacturers, and others was held in the exchange committee-room’, for the purpose of ‘considering the best means of effecting, during the ensuing session of parliament a change in the existing system of the corn laws’. In practice though, any actual discussions that took place in this meeting were short and produced no outcomes. R.H. Greg, who acted as chairman of this meeting, reminded those in attendance that they had gathered together to ‘consider the best plan to be pursued rather to enter into any particular discussion upon the question’.\footnote{Manchester Times, 1 February 1834.}

On this occasion, it was not important for the meeting to discuss the minutiae of the topic at hand. Rather, it was convened in order to be told about a pre-existing objective. It was reported, for instance, that there was ‘some discussion as to the desirableness of including for the committee those editors of newspapers who were or have been present at this meeting’, only for it to be eventually decided in the ‘negative’. Furthermore, at the end of the meeting, Edward Baxter proposed that a ‘subscription for the purpose of disseminating cheap publications upon the subject of the corn laws’ be raised. However, R.H. Greg also stated that he ‘thought this matter rather for the consideration of the committee rather than the meeting’.\footnote{Manchester Guardian, 1 February 1834.} It was preferable to allow a small and selective body of like-minded people to make a decision, rather than offering the opportunity for it to be discussed openly. The way Greg and his colleagues conducted this meeting in 1834 was symptomatic of an understanding about extra-
parliamentary politics that had worked effectively before 1832. But in the context of the mid 1830s and early 1840s, middle-class political reformers such as Greg and the members of the Circle were forced to reassess this understanding.

The Anti-Corn Law Association was superseded by the League. The League was able to reach a wider and more popular audience, partly because it ostensibly disentangled itself from sentiments of creed and political partisanship. According to the leaders of the League, it was a non-partisan political movement that was unaffiliated with feelings of party or religion.¹¹³ The League also positioned itself as a movement that transcended barriers of gender.¹¹⁴ For instance, an ‘Anti-Corn Law Demonstration’ was held in the Corn Exchange in 1840 where it was said that upwards of eight hundred and fifty ladies and gentlemen were in attendance. On this occasion, Thomas Potter rose and declared that he was ‘proud to show myself among you, and among the ladies who have honoured their presence’.¹¹⁵ In practice though women were only included into the League as fundraisers, petition canvassers and members of the audience at meetings. The fact that women were not invited to speak suggests that gender divisions were not truly transgressed.

Fundamentally though the composition of the League, as has been well-documented by historians, was dominated by manufacturers and industrialists.¹¹⁶ Although the leaders of the

¹¹⁵ *Manchester Times*, 31 October 1840.
League emphasised their capacity to appeal to a diverse social base, in practice it was a middle-class run enterprise. Leaders of the League, such as Cobden, unashamedly declared that the strength of their movement hinged upon the active participation of the middle classes. In a speech at Manchester in 1842, Cobden said that he did not ‘deny that the working-classes generally have attended our lectures and signed our petitions’. But he also had to ‘admit, that so far as the fervour and efficiency of our agitation has gone, it has eminently been a middle-class agitation’. Cobden also added that ‘we have had our meetings of dissenting ministers; we have obtained the co-operation of ladies; we have resorted to tea parties, and taken those pacific means for carrying out our views which mark us rather as a middle-class set of agitators’. So while the League did attempt to appeal to a broader, inclusive spectrum of support, there were clear limitations to the extent it can be regarded as a movement that transcended boundaries of class or gender.

The League deterred many working-class supporters because they did not support an immediate extension of the franchise. Unlike the Chartists who supported democratic reforms, the League believed an extension of the vote would naturally come about as an increasing number of people came to rent or own property that was the precondition for inclusion within the franchise. The League believed that the workers would benefit as consumers from falling prices and employment and increased wages, which would result from a greater level of overseas trade. This divide in thinking caused a considerable level of mistrust between the Chartists and the League. In 1841 a grand banquet was organised on the historic site of Peterloo (1819) – St Peter’s Field. The memory of what had happened twenty years before

\footnote{Prentice, *History of the Anti-Corn Law League*, p. 386.}


\footnote{*Manchester Times*, 4 December 1841.}
on this site still resonated strongly with the working-classes of Manchester and remained a symbolic site of the working-class struggle for parliamentary reform and the extension of the vote.\textsuperscript{120} But as Navickas has argued, holding a meeting on the site of Peterloo, the ‘liberal middle classes’ were able to appropriate the site of Peterloo ‘for their own aims and to oppose the Chartists associating the site with the campaign of universal suffrage’.\textsuperscript{121} Because the dimensions of the pavilion were one hundred and fifty yards in length and one hundred and five in width, it was a site that was perfectly capable of accommodating numerous guests.\textsuperscript{122} This banquet was largely attended by middle-class free traders.

However, a day later another one was organised specifically for the ‘working-classes’. This meeting involved upwards of three thousand people. This dinner was able to take place for a much lower cost because attendants were able to feast on the leftovers from the previous banquet.\textsuperscript{123} Crucially, seated alongside the operatives were Circle members Joseph Brotherton, Thomas Potter and J.B. Smith. Brotherton said that wanted to invite ‘them all to unite in accomplishing this object’.\textsuperscript{124} Although the second banquet was organised to be a specifically working-class event, leaders of the Anti-Corn Law campaign such as Brotherton, Smith and Potter recognised that there was an important opportunity to address a different audience. Rather than being an event that abandoned notions of class in Manchester, this banquet was structured in such a way that it reinforced a distinction between working-class and middle-class audiences. The attendance of Potter, Smith and Brotherton at this event signified that there was a real effort by the members of the Circle to give the appearance that their message was being broadcast across to a specific working-class audience. In addition, events such as

\textsuperscript{120} Pickering and Tyrell, \textit{People’s Bread}, p. 146.
\textsuperscript{121} Navickas, \textit{Protest and the Politics of Space}, p. 211.
\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Manchester Times}, 14 January 1840.
\textsuperscript{123} \textit{Manchester Times}, 18 January 1840.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
tea parties and dinners were social activities designed specifically to engage middle-class women. The Circle were keen to use social events as part of their changed political practice. Vernon has argued that the use of ‘counter-attractive events’ were designed to ‘fashion politics into a family affair’. These events brought different people from various backgrounds together into one space, where they could coalesce and learn together as one broader public who were all united behind a common political agenda.

Nevertheless, the League regularly faced hostility from radicals and Chartists. Henry Miller has shown that tension between the Chartists and the League also reflected tensions between employers and workers. In one respect the Chartists displayed aversion to the League due to the fact that many of the League’s members objected to factory legislation and demonstrated support for the new Poor Law. Additionally, the Chartists were suspicious that free trade was a ruse by employers to lower wages. Many Chartists thought that when the price of food fell, a logical consequence would be that wages would fall too. We can also recall that sources of tension emanated from the League’s unwillingness to dilute its singular objective by calling for universal suffrage, or indeed, any political reform.

In 1842 Archibald Prentice gave a lecture in Ardwick where he addressed the issue of the Corn Laws. After Prentice had finished making a speech at this event a young man professing to be a Chartist confronted Prentice asking why ‘the middle classes did not become reformers’? The young Chartist justified this criticism on the basis that Prentice believed in an educational qualification for the vote instead of universal suffrage. Prentice’s views were probably more advanced than most of his middle-class peers, but still unsatisfactory to local Chartists.

125 Gurney, Wanting and Having, p. 7.
126 Vernon, Politics and People, p. 337.
Nevertheless, Prentice defended the middle classes as the ‘great teacher of the working classes’. Ignoring the impact of Chartism, Prentice declared that it was the activities of movements such as the League, which had ‘roused’ the working classes from the ‘apathy under which they had long slumbered’. The young Chartist and others should listen to these leaders, Prentice added. Feargus O’Connor, the Chartist leader, had made his name loudly speaking on behalf of reform in the name of the working classes, but he had been ‘scarcely heard’ on this very topic when he was an MP.\textsuperscript{128}

The Circle attributed O’Connor’s success in appealing to the working classes to his use of the mass platform, a tactic they had always been reluctant to embrace, as we have seen in earlier chapters. The Circle remained sceptical of the use of the mass platform, especially when used by Chartists as in the ‘radical demonstration’ of 300,000 people on Kersal Moor on 24 September 1838.\textsuperscript{129} However, as with political associations, the mass platform was a tactic that Manchester liberals could no longer afford to ignore. Mass meetings such as the one that took place on Kersal Moor attracted significant amounts of publicity and attention in the press. The press could easily translate the idea that a particular political cause was important, by drawing attention towards the scale of its participants.\textsuperscript{130}

Manchester liberals were prepared, then, to organise collective action on a larger scale, borrowing some of the practices from the mass platform. For example, a ‘Great Anti-Corn Law Demonstration’ or ‘Out-Door Meeting’ took place on 2 June 1841, which was allegedly held in response to a Chartist jibe that the ‘Corn Law Repealers did not [dare] appeal to public

\textsuperscript{128} Manchester Times, 29 January 1842.
\textsuperscript{129} Manchester Guardian, 26 September 1838; Chase, Chartism, p. 32.
\textsuperscript{130} Morning Chronicle, 26 September 1838; The Morning Post, 26 September 1838; The Standard, 26 September 1838; Liverpool Mercury, 28 September 1838; Leeds Mercury, 29 September 1838; The Northern Star, 29 September 1838; The Leeds Times, 29 September 1838; Berkshire Chronicle, 29 September 1838; Caledonian Mercury, 29 September 1838.
opinion in an open meeting’. This meeting took place in the context of the Whigs’ free trade budget being defeated and a looming general election. Accordingly, a meeting was organised, that involved the various ancillary associations surrounding Manchester and its neighbouring towns. Initially, this meeting started off as a procession, which marched through the various streets across Manchester before it ultimately ended up in Stephenson’s square: where a platform had been raised that accommodated over 200 people. The bulk of the audience, however, was said to have been made up predominantly by members of the working classes.

Addressing the mass audience held in Stephenson’s square in June 1841, Edward Watkin, the son of Circle member Absalom Watkin, said that ‘we are here, not to discuss any abstract political principle, not to discuss anything for which party politicians contend’. Instead they had met to ‘take up the principle which our fathers took up on the 16th of August, 1819’. This highlighted an often forgotten fact that the Peterloo meeting was held to call for the repeal of the Corn Laws as well as demands for universal male suffrage and parliamentary reform.

Memories of the past were similarly utilised by the League to galvanise their political following. Even though Watkin’s own father and others in the Circle had actually made a concerted attempt to avoid the commotion connected with the events of Peterloo (1819), this meeting was a clear effort to channel the memory of what had taken place twenty years earlier. Fostering a sense of unity and cooperation between working-class people and the middle classes was clearly important for people such as Brotherton. As Brotherton said, ‘instead of masters and workmen quarrelling about the amount of wages, let them unite in removing the great cause of their distress, and that was these monopolies’. In the context of a mass

131 Manchester Times, 5 June 1841.
132 Ibid.
133 Ibid.
134 Chase, Chartism, pp. 33-4.
135 Manchester Guardian, 23 October 1841.
platform meeting, the middle-class leaders of the League explained that the true interests of the working classes could only be ameliorated if the Corn Law legislation was repealed.

While notable figures such as Thomas Potter and Cobden were present at this meeting, the majority of the members of the Circle did not attend. But evidently those who did attend, such as Thomas Potter, wanted the Anti-Corn Law cause to be seen as a popular one. These members of the Circle did not want to concede that they were frightened of addressing large and unrestricted audiences. Ignoring the need to utilise the mass platform, nevertheless, was futile. As the Manchester Times commented, ‘leader after leader may have been convicted of dishonesty and treachery, and dupe after dupe may have suffered for his folly’; however, ‘the hope that the discontent will disappear with the disappearance of those who seemed to be its main exitors, is without rational foundation. O’Connor and Stephens were not causes but effects’. Either political groups such as the Circle had to learn to embrace these tactics, or they could face a situation where their political opponents might fill a political void and cause future mischief.

Earlier in this chapter it was mentioned that the members of the Circle came to accept the political reality of attending meetings of like-minded individuals who were capable of expressing a united political message. The members of the Circle also recognised that collective mass popular demonstrations could help provide the impression that a certain political initiative was important and worthy of recognition. An open letter written by Thomas Potter in 1834, for instance, and that was published in the Manchester Times to the various ‘shopkeepers, and working classes of Manchester, Salford, and the adjoining townships’, initially implored readers to ‘obey the laws as they now stand’. But Potter also recalled how

136 Manchester Times, 11 March 1843.
their ‘noble exertions’ in the Reform agitation of 1832 produced a ‘petition, signed by nearly 25,000 persons in the case of a few hours, praying that the supplies might be stopped till the people’s reasonable and just wishes were complied with’. Under certain circumstances it was practical to utilise more direct and active political tactics such as refusing to pay for supplies. Edward Baxter, during a meeting of ratepayers of the parish of Manchester, said that there was a time and place to orchestrate a ‘little useful agitation’, even if for the most time public opinion could most usefully be presented to their representatives in the Commons.

Although the members of the Circle recognised the practical needs of engaging in mass popular politics, they ultimately continued to express some doubts about its long-lasting potential and utility. In 1842, after Thomas Potter seconded a motion made in an Anti-Corn Law meeting held in the Exchange, where he said that he ‘had no great hope as to the effect of this petition; but he would second it in the hope, however futile, that it would do some good’. The fact that some members of the Circle resorted to using mass popular politics in the early 1840s, and obviously saw that these tactics offered pragmatic solutions to their political enterprises, did not deter them from reflecting on some of their drawbacks. Mass petitioning and mass demonstrations might have helped raise awareness of a particular issue, but the Circle were also aware of the limitations of these tactics, even as they were forced to adopt them.

By 1842 though the members of the Circle’s importance in local political affairs was superseded by a generation of liberal reformers. It is important to remember that the Circle’s members were elderly men in the 1840s. In July 1842 Richard Potter had died of a brain tumour and John Edward Taylor passed away in January 1844. The surviving members of the Circle

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137 Manchester Times, 6 September 1834.
138 Manchester Times, 28 December 1836.
139 Manchester Times, 5 March 1842.
on occasion still contributed to political discussions and helped lend their assistance to the League. In a Town Hall meeting held in November 1842, a group of manufacturers, merchants, spinners and ‘other capitalists in Lancashire and Cheshire’ gathered in order to consider the ‘ruinous effects produced on trade by the operation of the corn laws’. Thomas Potter and William Harvey were amongst the attendants of this meeting. One of the aims of this meeting was to raise a subscription of £4000. Accordingly, a committee of thirty-six people had been organised prior to the meeting to oversee this duty. Thomas Potter observed that he ‘was almost ashamed to find that his name was not on the committee’, but that his ‘son [Thomas Potter Jnr] was there … as a substitute for him, and he would no doubt be very indefatigable in procuring subscriptions for the League’.

Thomas Potter might have noted that he ‘was almost ashamed’ to not be included in the committee list, but he also recognised that individuals such as his son were in a position to make political contributions of their own. In the period between 1842 and 1846, Brotherton, Smith and Prentice appeared to be the only members of the Circle who attended meetings of the League. Brotherton remained the MP for Salford until his death in 1857. As the MP for the neighbouring town of Salford, Brotherton was invited by the Anti-Corn Law League council, which was led by George Wilson, to take a prominent seat on the platform during large scale public meetings held at the Corn Exchange and the Free Trade Hall. Although Brotherton was a visible attendant at these meetings he was not a keynote speaker, but rather made short pithy speeches that acknowledged the sentiments of previous speakers.

Brotherton and other Circle members such as Thomas Potter were still important political figures in Manchester politics in the 1840s. Whilst Brotherton was still an MP and represented the people of Salford

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140 *Manchester Times*, 26 November 1842.
141 *Manchester Times*, 7 January 1843; *Manchester Times*, 20 January 1845.
in Parliament, he was also a link to the past and a previous generation of leading middle-class political reformers in Manchester. Even if they did not make compelling speeches or necessarily endorsed the League’s mass popular political techniques, their support for this movement legitimised it and cemented its reputation as a political organisation that continued a clear middle-class led and liberal tradition in Manchester.

**Conclusion**

Between 1832 and 1846 there were significant developments in the political practice of the Circle. These changes were a response to a series of innovations begotten by a post-1832 context that was shaped by parliamentary and municipal reform. The growth of partisanship, including the rise of a formidably organised local Conservatism, the decline of Manchester’s traditional local institutions, and the emergence of new instruments for mass politics, all required the Circle to adjust their political practice. Although the members of the Circle harboured reservations towards mass popular politics, they also recognised that there was a pragmatic need to adopt them as well. Initially, liberals were divided in Manchester and uncertain over what course they should pursue politically. It was important therefore to find a way to bridge some of these divisions and to foster the development of a more united political front. Although groups such as the Circle respected the idea that different groups should be able to voice their own opinions, they also recognised that too much political discussion and decision-making was counter-productive.

Realising that the formats that they had utilised before 1832 – predominantly the indoor deliberative assembly – no longer carried the same political weight, more direct, organised and dynamic political tactics were called upon by groups such as the Circle. The use of mass popular political activities in particular, focused on single national issues, helped channel
liberal political activity and bypass any unwanted and counter-productive political discussions. Through organised and hierarchical associations such as the Reform and Anti-Corn Law Association, liberals in Manchester managed to cultivate successful and decisive political and electoral campaigns. The period 1832 to 1846 was a transitional period in Manchester that indicated that an older more exclusive style of extra-parliamentary politics no longer worked. Even though the Circle felt most people were not intellectually ready to be involved with politics, they were forced to adapt to a situation that placed a significant premium on mass popular participation.
Conclusion

Studying the social and religious identities as well as the political activities of the members of the Little Circle has helped to broaden our understanding of what it meant to be a liberal middle-class reformer in early nineteenth-century Manchester. The Circle’s liberalism was defined by their belief that only a small and rational public had the capacity to represent the wider political and social interests of all people who resided in Manchester. The members of the Circle pushed middle-class reforming ideas to the forefront of local public debate during the early nineteenth century. My thesis re-directs historical focus away from the study of working-class radicalism towards other early nineteenth-century political practices. Instead, this study forces us to consider the presence of distinctive and significant middle-class extra-parliamentary modes of politics in Manchester during the early nineteenth century.

The first chapter analysed the religious, social and educational backgrounds of the Circle. These factors, coupled with the way the Circle’s members reacted to the events of Peterloo (1819), were shown in this chapter to have influenced their theory and practice, which was centred on a deliberative and rational style of extra-parliamentary political action. In the second chapter, I highlighted the ways in which the members of the Circle distinguished between the concepts of the people and the public. Their understanding of the people incorporated everyone, but their interpretation of the public was more selective. For the members of the Circle, the latter group was comprised of bourgeois men. The Circle believed such men were capable of rational thought and had the capacity to engage in the deliberative style of indoor public meeting, which became the hallmark of the Circle’s political practice. Leading on from chapter two, the third chapter analysed the way the members of the Circle used small and indoor public meetings that were generally organised in concert with local officials in Manchester in the decade leading up to the 1832 Reform Act. In the final chapter, I explained that the use of
the indoor public meeting declined as local political culture was reshaped by electoral reform, partisanship and the development of new forms of political association.

Taken together, these chapters have contributed to a series of historical debates that help enrich our understanding of what it meant to be a Nonconformist, middle-class and liberal political reformer in early nineteenth-century Manchester. Examining the religious influences of the Little Circle has deepened existing understandings of the intersection between public politics and religious belief in the early nineteenth century. Historians have observed that Unitarians across Britain became influential players and protagonists in local politics during the early nineteenth century. The majority of the Circle were Unitarians who attended the Cross Street Chapel. Other members of this group were Bible Christians, Scottish Presbyterians and members of the Methodist New Connection. Yet all of the members of the Little Circle shared a common religious understanding of the importance of rational thought, public duty and tolerating opposing points of opinion. Specifically, this thesis has shown how the religious beliefs of the members of the Circle were translated into political practice. Manchester Unitarians were taught that they had an important role to play in public life, and that it was their duty to make an impact in local political and public life. My thesis has shown that the Circle’s religious backgrounds underscored the importance of uncovering the truth through rational deliberation: an understanding that significantly influenced the way the Circle’s members approached politics and the representation of public opinion in Manchester.

An analysis of the Circle’s leisure and cultural interests further demonstrated their conviction and attachment to rational and deliberative political action. Simon Gunn and Alan Kidd have shown how the urban middle class in Manchester and other towns shaped their urban environment and civic life through material improvement and a culture of participating in voluntary associations. Other historians have also emphasised the role of charity and philanthropy by bourgeois groups in towns such as Manchester. This thesis has shown that political ideas, bourgeois backgrounds and interests were an equally important factor in the making of middle-class urban identities. The self-association of the members of the Little Circle with improvement and reform shaped their political ideas, as well as how they interacted with the urban and civic environment in their town.

A study of the activities of the members of the Circle highlights the centrality of deliberation in the construction of early nineteenth-century ideas of public opinion. This study has utilised Jürgen Habermas’s notion of the ‘bourgeois Public Sphere’ to explore the Little Circle’s ideas about public opinion and political life. Habermas described the public sphere as a physical and ideological construct that allowed a small, rational and reasoning public to interact through the press and other sites of opinion formation such as debating societies, salons and coffee houses, in order to criticise figures of public authority anonymously and to formulate a rational

expression of public opinion. As we have seen, the Circle’s concept of the public was defined as selective, male and middle class. While everyone, in the Little Circle’s view, had the capacity for intellectual and moral improvement, not everyone had the capacity to lead public opinion and influence political life. This analysis therefore lends weight to Alan Kahan’s argument that nineteenth-century liberalism was defined by the idea that one’s ‘capacity’ to govern was determined by levels of rationality, intelligence, talent and education.

The press was one forum through which a middle-class and male public could improve their awareness and understanding of their town and nation’s political and social issues. Historians have shown how the press was highly influential in shaping public opinion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The members of the Circle helped establish two newspapers in Manchester: the *Manchester Guardian* (1821) and the *Manchester Times* (1828). Newspapers were vital to the production and dissemination of middle-class public opinion in Manchester. The *Manchester Guardian*, which was edited by Circle member John Edward Taylor, was the best-selling and most read newspaper in the town. Newspapers have been the predominant source base in this study, but the focus on newspapers has been directed towards the way they managed to broadcast the proceedings and debates that unfolded in indoor public meetings. The Manchester press advertised and rehearsed the expression and formation of public opinion through small indoor meetings comprising of a small and rational bourgeois public.

An analysis of the indoor public meetings in Manchester has developed our historical understanding of how the middle class sought to formulate and represent expressions of public opinion. The use of indoor meetings has previously been addressed by Robin Handley, Iorwerth Prorthero and, more recently, by Janette Martin, mostly in the context of radical movements. All of whom have emphasised how public meetings were used to form an expression of collective local public opinion in the respective towns they studied. This study however has shown that the Little Circle believed indoor public meetings should only represent the opinions of a select, rational and bourgeois public acting and speaking in the name of the wider community in Manchester. In doing so, my thesis diverts historical attention away from the activities of radicals, to other equally significant channels for early nineteenth-century political culture.

The historiography of early nineteenth-century popular politics has largely, if not entirely, been dominated by studies of working-class and radical politics. These campaigns placed a premium on large-scale popular participation that utilised forums such as the mass platform. I, on the other hand, have argued that following the events of Peterloo in 1819, the members of the Circle sought to distance themselves from the mass platform and mass popular political activities associated with working-class radicals. Instead, middle-class liberals in Manchester, and particularly members of the Circle, preferred to effect political change through the deliberations of a small, male and bourgeois public. Before 1832 this public was primarily

constituted through indoor public meetings that were organised in concert with local officials to demonstrate a degree of political legitimacy. When this was not possible, the Circle relied on their own authority to sanction a meeting. Organising meetings held in local buildings such as the town hall, that were presided over by a local official, defined the Circle’s understanding of public political involvement. These meetings were held at times and in spaces that practically excluded the working class. Smaller public meetings reinforced the image that Manchester was producing a calm, rational and distinctly middle-class expression of public opinion.

After 1832, though, such indoor public meetings were less effective as a political strategy. Post-reform politics in Manchester, as in other towns, became more polarised on partisan lines, thereby making it harder to achieve consensus across these divisions (which frequently reflected religious identities as well as party ones).¹⁵⁰ My thesis provides a local case study that demonstrates some of the important, but hitherto overlooked, changes in political culture after reform. Groups such as the Circle retreated from the indoor public meeting and instead began to attend their own ticketed meetings and dinners. The establishment of new locally elected bodies, such as the Town Council founded in 1838, merely provided new arenas for the expression of political division rather than forums for reconciliation. However, liberals in Manchester achieved a significant level of partisan dominance through parliamentary and municipal elections. This was a significant shift in the political culture of Manchester: division was now overcome by one side securing a party majority, rather than the reconciliation and harmonisation of opinions through deliberative discussion.

Finally, this thesis re-evaluates the formation and reformation of Manchester liberalism. My thesis illustrated how an older generation of liberals in Manchester were forced to adapt and re-evaluate their understanding of the scope and remit of the public after 1832. Vic Gatrell and Michael Turner have suggested that the members of the Circle helped to establish a political culture in Manchester that provided the platform for the later dominance of liberal groups such as the Anti-Corn Law League and their brand of mass popular machine politics. While the members of the Circle had distanced themselves from mass popular political activities before 1832, a younger generation of liberals in Manchester began to utilise larger and grander meetings after this point. During the late 1830s and early 1840s the members of the Circle, as part of the free trade movement in Manchester, were forced to attend meetings where a larger and more diverse audience were in attendance. In so doing, they were also forced to revaluate their understanding of the scope of the public, since they realised that campaigns such as the one to repeal the Corn Laws needed to demonstrate a larger and more irresistible level of popular support.

This study has focused on Manchester and on the members of the Little Circle, and is necessarily limited in these respects. However, the question of how non-elite groups across the country, whether middle-class or not, sought to develop their political practice, effect political change, as well as form and re-evaluate strategy and tactics in the light of major shifts in political culture, is worthy of further and broader analysis. Further research in this vein would allow us to understand how far the Circle’s approach was unique or typical of other towns or, indeed, social and religious groups. Foregrounding social class ahead of other collective and

self-identities, has become unfashionable in the field of modern British political history, but the study of the Little Circle suggests that it may be time for historians to revive class as a useful category of analysis in the study of early nineteenth-century popular politics. While this study has focused on local political culture, future research might follow up on how that culture interacted with high/elite/parliamentary politics at Westminster through representations, petitions, print, and after 1832, MPs and elections. This includes, of course, the parliamentary careers of some of the members of the Little Circle. Such studies would shed new, and much-needed, light on shifts in the culture of representation either side of the 1832 Reform Act.

Finally, the thesis prompts a reconsideration of the trajectories of nineteenth-century liberalism. The legacies of the Circle in relation to the formation of the free trade liberalism associated with Richard Cobden and John Bright would repay further study. The shift within liberal thinking and practice from representation through deliberative discussion to partisanship and majoritarianism captures an important transition within political culture, with significant long-term consequences for the Victorian tradition of parliamentary government and its transformation into party government. How far such trends were prevalent outside Manchester, nevertheless, is a question for future historians rather than this thesis. However, in this and other respects, this study hopes to have opened up new avenues for future researchers.

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