How did ordinary people win the right to vote?

Y8 Extended History Project
1. What were the problems with the way people voted in the 1800s?

Rotten Burroughs and open ballots
Throughout this project we are going to look at the changes in Britain’s democracy through the eyes of four groups of people:

- A working-class woman
- A working-class radical (factory worker)
- Middle-class businessman
- Tory landowner (MP)
A working-class woman: The price of bread is too high, our rent has gone up again and we are starving. I need an MP who can make Britain fairer, so I don’t starve.

Middle-class businessman: I employ hundreds of people in my factories, I pay taxes and my factories have made Britain very wealthy. So why don’t I get a say in the government?

A working-class radical (factory worker): It is our natural right to have a say in who governs us. The working men of Britain are what keep this country going and deserve recognition. If we do not get what is our right, then we should revolt!

Tory landowner (MP): Our political system has worked perfectly and has lasted for centuries. Only wealthy landowners should vote because we have greater interest in Britain doing well. These working classes are too uneducated to have a say.
**Working conditions were hard**
- Hours were long. It was not unusual to work 5am - 7pm with only short breaks for meal times or toilet stops. When people were desperate for jobs employers could easily find workers who would accept these long hours.
- Factories were full of dangers - unshielded machinery, toxic materials and dust.
- Conditions in the mines were even more dangerous.
- There were no official limits on working hours. People were campaigning for a Ten Hours Act – limiting working hours to ten hours per day.
- Jobs were insecure. When the order book dried up workers were laid off.

**Living conditions were awful**
- Towns had grown quickly and houses had been built so fast that they were poor quality, full of damp.
- Sanitation was bad: there were toilets in the yard and a bucket in the corner of the room.
- Houses were overcrowded. A family lived and slept in one room and sometimes sub-let to other people to earn more money.
- The factory machines were steam-driven, so the air was full of smoke from the furnaces.
- There was no system of refuse collection so rubbish piled up in the streets.
- People often kept animals in town so there was the noise and smell of cows, pigs and chickens.
- Drinking water was from a standpipe (which might not be very clean) or from a stream which would almost certainly be polluted.

**Short-term problems in 1815–1820**
People had lived with these problems for years. They were prepared to accept them as long as they got good wages and could eat. But in the years after the Napoleonic Wars ...
- There was unemployment. During the Napoleonic Wars many industries had boomed because they were supplying the army with kit or weapons or rations. After the war, orders dried up so people were laid off; thousands of ex-soldiers and sailors were looking for jobs as well.
- Factories were introducing new machines that were taking the place of skilled labourers.
- Food prices were sometimes low, but sometimes very high. When prices rose almost all workers had difficulty affording enough food for themselves and their families.
- Far from helping ordinary people in these times the government taxed them. The government had spent too much money fighting the Napoleonic wars and to pay its debts it had increased all kinds of taxes – including those on food.
- The government also passed a Corn Law that kept the price of wheat artificially high. So ordinary people had to pay more for their bread.
1c) What were the problems with British elections?

Only 4% of men could vote! Men usually had to own land to be able to vote.

MPs (Members of Parliament) did not get paid to do their job so only rich people could become MPs.

Only men were allowed to vote. Women were seen as unstable and incapable of dealing with the pressure of voting.

When people voted it was done in public. You had to stand up and say to everyone who they were voting for. This meant that voters could be threatened or bribed. MPs used to give voters money and beer to get their votes.
1c) What were the problems with British elections?

1. Each of the counties on the map could send **two MPs** to Parliament:
   - The county of Yorkshire had a population of 973,113.
   - The county of Rutland had a population of 16,380.
   Both of these had two MPs each!

2. New booming industrial towns like Manchester (85,000 people), Leeds (75,000 people) and Sheffield (65,000) had no MPs at all.
1c) What were the problems with British elections?

3. Some places had very few people who were allowed to vote but still got an MP to send to Parliament. These places were called **Rotten Boroughs**.

For example:

- Old Sarum had only 7 people who were allowed to vote but still had an MP.

- In an election in 1802 in Appleby, there was only one candidate to be an MP and only ONE voter in the entire area who could vote.
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<th>Statement 1:</th>
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<td>“There is no need for reform. The political system we have now has made this country great.”</td>
<td>“If anyone gets the vote it should be us. We are better educated, better behaved and wealthier. They are radical, violent and dirty.”</td>
<td>“Industrialists and businessmen are the ones that make Britain rich today. Yet we don’t have a say in how we’re governed.”</td>
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<td>“Large industrial towns have no MPs to represent all the people who live there.”</td>
<td>“If we allow one reform, it will be the beginning of so many changes that we will never be able to stop it.”</td>
<td>“We’ve been running the country for generations. We’ve been born and educated to govern. We have the experience.”</td>
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<td>“All men who work deserve the vote.”</td>
<td>“At the moment, bad laws are made, which makes our lives worse. Our children go hungry and our homes are falling apart.”</td>
<td>“Why should my voice mean any less than anyone else’s? I’m just as important and intelligent as the men.”</td>
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2. What were the different methods people used to get the vote?

The Peterloo Massacre 1918
People all across Britain were becoming increasingly frustrated with the lack of power that they had to change their circumstances. People wanted more say over their own lives and wanted to be listened to by their government. Large groups of protestors had begun to meet in cities like Birmingham, Leeds and London calling for Parliamentary reform, lowering of taxes and an expansion of the franchise for all adults.

The wealthy Tory’s in power at the time were terrified of working-class people getting the vote because they viewed them as uneducated savages who would destroy Britain. They were the ones benefitting from the system and did not want those benefits to stop. Furthermore, they worried that these protests could lead to violent rebellion as they had done in France just a few decades earlier when the King of France, Louis XVI, had been executed by the people.
1793 – French King Executed!
King Louis XVI is executed and the rich nobles in France are executed. Thousands killed in Revolution.

1795 - Attack on Prime Minister William Pitt
Stones were thrown at Downing Street home. Mob chants ‘No war, no famine, no Pitt, no king!’

1812 – Prime Minister Assassinated
Prime Minister Spencer Perceval shot in House of Commons by a merchant who had gone bankrupt. Reports of crowds celebrating in Midland towns.

1813 – Luddites smash factory machines
Unhappy workers in Yorkshire smash machines. Spreads across country.

1815 - Downing Street Attacked Again
Stones thrown at Prime Minister’s home. Crowds demand jobs and bread.

1816 – Mob riots in London
Peaceful meeting turns to chaos before Henry Hunt can even speak. Drunken crowds try to seize guns from Tower of London.

1817 – Revolution in Derbyshire?
Spies reveal plot to overthrow government. Rebellion feared all over the north.

1817 – Protest March on London
Unemployed march from St Peter’s Fields, Manchester to London. One killed, several wounded as soldiers stop the march.
What happened at St Peter’s Fields?

As we have seen, life in 1819 in Industrial towns was harsh and all of the MPS were farmers and landowners who were not interested in helping poor workers to improve their living and working conditions. The government had a record of harshly punishing the leaders of reform movements in previous years with many being beaten, arrested or ‘transported’ to Australia.

In March 1918, a group called the Manchester Patriotic Society Union was formed. Leading radicals were invited to join and the vowed to fight for better rights from the government. These people believed in taking strong action to get their ideas heard by the people in charge. Reform leaders still wanted to bring more and more people together to protest against the conditions they were being forced to live in and pressure the government to make changes to the way electoral system in Britain.

A meeting was organised for 16th August at St Peter’s Field in Manchester. They planned to discuss the need to allow working people the right to vote. The main speaker was Henry Hunt who was a radical politician and a great speaker who wanted the vote for all men, annual parliaments, a secret ballot and an end to child labour and a ten-hour working day.
What happened at St Peter’s Fields?

As soon as they heard about the meeting, the local Magistrates (a person in charge of laws) were worried about a large group of reformers gathering together and were concerned that the meeting would end in a riot. They arranged for a large force to be in Manchester on the day of the meeting made up of infantry soldiers, cavalrymen, Royal Horse Artillery, and the Manchester Special Constables.

In the eyes of the wealthy magistrates, the group of ordinary people protesting were viewed as terrorists.

*Terrorism is the unofficial use of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of political aims or beliefs – do the protestors fit this description?*
Reform leaders in Manchester call a big public meeting.

Manchester has no police force. Magistrates are worried about law and order so they call in soldiers, including the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry.

Demonstrators arrive from all around Manchester, perhaps 50,000 people, many in their Sunday best. They march with brass bands playing.
As soon as Hunt begins to speak, magistrates order the Yeomany to arrest him.

Yeomany cut their way out through the crowd with their swords.

Eleven people are killed, including two women, and 400 injured.
The next day a newspaper, in a sarcastic reference to the famous battle of Waterloo four years earlier, calls it ‘The Peterloo Massacre’.

The government congratulates the Manchester magistrates on their handling of the situation.

Henry Hunt is charged with ‘assembling with unlawful banners for the purpose of exciting discontent’ and sentenced to two and a half years in prison. Other speakers are sentenced to one year. A magistrate tells one reformer ‘Some of you reformers ought to be hanged – the rope is already round your neck’.
BANNING NOTICE
MEETINGS OF MORE THAN 50 PEOPLE ARE NO LONGER ALLOWED, AND, HOUSES MAY BE SEARCHED FOR WEAPONS.
MAGISTRATES CONSIDER

The government bans meetings of more than 50 people and gives magistrates power to search houses for weapons.

The tax on newspapers is greatly increased to try to stop workers reading them and getting ‘dangerous’ ideas.

AND WAS THE VOTING SYSTEM CHANGED TO MAKE IT FAIRER?
The answer is no. There was no change in who had the right to vote in elections.
The events of the Peterloo Massacre

• The crowd at Peterloo was made up of families. They carried banners and were dressed in their best clothes.

• Henry Hunt’s speech called for working people to be given the vote.

• Almost 60,000 people attended, many walked from as far away as Liverpool, Preston and Bolton.

• The main speakers, including Henry Hunt, arrived at 1.20pm.

• Magistrates were concerned at the size of the growing crowd.

• By 1.30pm the Magistrates decided the town was in great danger and ordered that Hunt and the other leaders should be arrested.

• On orders from the Magistrates, the army entered St Peter’s Field by a path cleared by Special Constables;

• Members of the crowd linked arms to stop Hunt being arrested.

• The soldiers started to use their sabres, (swords), to cut through the crowd.

• By 2pm most of the crowd had fled but 15 people were dead, 400 more had been wounded; some had had their hands or arms cut off in the process.
The events of the Peterloo Massacre

• The Home Secretary wrote a letter to the Manchester Magistrates, to congratulate them for the action they had taken;

• Parliament did nothing to give the vote to the ordinary people;

• Instead they passed 6 acts to try to ensure that reform meetings like Peterloo could not happen again.

• Organisers of the meeting were charged with “assembling with unlawful banners at an unlawful meeting for the purpose of exciting discontent.”

• Henry Hunt was sent to prison for 2 years 6 months and other leaders were given 1 year sentences.

• No action was taken against any of the soldiers who had killed the people in the crowd.

• The government tried to control what people heard about the massacre - They tried to stop the newspapers from printing what had really happened;

• The facts began to leak out;

• Many people were horrified – especially because over 100 women had been wounded by the soldiers.
1d)

Use the following links to learn about the Massacre of Peterloo.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVq-1TDsRmE (clip from the film PG13)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XyMANeWCV9c

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eh_pikNlEp4
Source A: From the Manchester Chronicle, 21 August 1819. This newspaper was on the side of the government.

When Mr Hunt arrived the crowd clapped loudly. Soon there was confusion. There was a crush and people cried out and shouted. An army officer was hit on the forehead with a brick. The soldiers were not to blame for all the deaths. No one thought that people would bring weapons to the meeting, but they did. Many people had their pockets full of stones.

Source C: John smith, a journalist, who was at Peterloo. Smith worked for the Liverpool Mercury which was in favour of working people getting the vote.

I saw no one lift up sticks to the soldiers. If any stones had been thrown, I would have seen it. I am over six feet high and I was able to see everything that happened. I heard no swearing and no violence from the crowd. Mr Hunt had just started his speech when the soldiers charged into the crowd forcing them to the ground and crushing the people.
The original plaque commemorating the Peterloo Massacre.

The updated plaque that replaced the original blue one in 2007.
For ten years after Peterloo the violence died down, the economy recovered, and food prices dropped. This improved people’s mood, and some became more satisfied with how things were to demand change, others had been scared off by the harsh treatment of protesters during the Peterloo massacre.

However, in the 1830s, protest was back on the agenda. There were riots in the countryside: farm workers destroyed machines and in Parliament there were new MPs who were in favour of reform.

More and more meetings began to happen between reformers who demanded changes to the voting system so that all men could have a say in how the country was run. Reformers actually managed to get Parliament to agree to a law that changed the law, but it was rejected. This news sparked riots across England particularly in Nottingham and Bristol.
Following the violent riots in Nottingham and Bristol, rumours spread that 200,000 protesters were going to march from Birmingham to London and not leave until Parliament agreed to give more people the vote. In response, the government ordered a regiment of soldiers to sharpen their swords... but the soldiers refused! The government gave in and in June 1832 the Reform Act was passed. Below is what it did and did not do.

- Gave the right to vote to men who owned, leased or rented property over a certain value and earned at least £10 a year.
- Increased the number of men who could vote to 8 percent of the population. Large cities such as Leeds, Manchester and Bradford got MPs for the first time.
- Got rid of rotten boroughs.

- Voters still had not own property or land.
- Working men could not vote (didn’t earn enough or own land).
- Women could not vote.
- Voting was still public so bribery and fear still played a part in elections.
- The countryside and south still had more MPs than the north and big industrial towns.
New Peterloo Massacre memorial

The Peterloo Massacre memorial was built in 2019. The design incorporates mounted circles that display the names of the victims of the massacre in 1819.

The designer, Jeremy Deller, wanted it to be a place that ordinary people can meet to protest. At the summit it also has a compass pointing towards places of other examples of government’s punishing people for protesting for their rights.