THE DERBYSHIRE REFORM SOCIETIES

1791-1793

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THE impetus to the foundation of reform societies in the provinces was provided by news of the French Revolution in England. In Derbyshire, as elsewhere, initial favourable reactions were followed by a gradually widening division of opinion on the subject, and it was in the sharpened political atmosphere at the end of the year 1791 that reform societies were set up in the county.

The first of these, the Derby Society for Political Information, founded in December 1791, appears to have been one of the oldest of the provincial corresponding societies.[1] The only other place in Derbyshire where a political society was organized and existed for any length of time was Belper, from January 1792. In a letter to the London body in March of that year, the secretary of the Sheffield Constitutional Society wrote: "You will notice also the Belpar address; they applied to us about two months ago, for instructions as to our mode of proceeding etc. but had not then formed themselves into any regular association." A fairly definite organization must have followed closely afterwards, however, as by early March, they were a strong and flourishing association.[2]

In contrast, there was a surprising dearth of reform activity in the north of the county. In both the north-east and north-west, there existed industrial communities similar to Derby and Belper. In particular, at Chesterfield, the third largest town in Derbyshire at this time, efforts at reform organization were markedly unsuccessful. Chesterfield was, however, noted for its conservatism. A government agent sent in 1792 to inspect military arrangements in the north wrote:

"I was much pleased at the short distance of 12 miles to find the disposition of the people the reverse of what I had seen in the place I had just left (Sheffield). Here (at Chesterfield) five companies of the Fifty Seventh Foot are living on the best of terms with the inhabitants."[3]

Any radicals in Chesterfield may have been tempted to join the Sheffield

1 Edward Thompson, *The making of the English working class*, 1963, 20.

2 Rules of the Derby Society for Political Information in Derby Borough Library (DBL), dated 1791. The Sheffield Constitutional Society, generally acknowledged to be the first popular society in the provinces, was founded in December. See J. Taylor, "The Sheffield Constitutional Society", *Trans. Hunter Arch. Soc.*, V (1940), 133-46; A. W. L. Seaman, "Reform politics at Sheffield 1791-97", *Trans. Hunter Arch. Soc.*, VII (1956), 215-28.

3 PRO. HO 42/20. 13 June 1792.

society rather than form a separate one. It is interesting that the only radical demonstration attempted in Chesterfield was organized from Sheffield. Similarly reformers in the north-western industrial communities may have looked to Stockport and Manchester, where there were flourishing societies.

At Stony Middleton, the centre of the Peak lead-mining industry, there was, however, some initial enthusiasm for reform.[4] This is not entirely surprising. Working conditions in the lead industry were not dissimilar from those in the cutlery trade at Sheffield, where a very large society existed. Miners, like cutlers, worked on their own account and not on a wage basis. There is no record of any reform society having been set up, however, and no evidence of organized activity at this time. The sparsity of the working population, as compared with that at Sheffield — or, indeed, at Derby and Belper — and the lack of a middle-class leadership would partly account for this.

These two factors were undoubtedly important in the greater success and longer life of the Derby and Belper societies. These were the biggest towns in the county where there had been very striking industrial changes in the 18th century, and there was a larger working-class population, though these were not always the most enthusiastic supporters of reform.

Most significant probably was the existence in the neighbourhood of Derby of a group of middle-class people with a keen interest in reform, who set up and persevered with their reform society. This group consisted of industrialists and professional men such as journalists, nonconformist ministers and doctors. Few members derived their livelihood from land. Some were engaged directly in industrial production. Others were employed in the professions that had expanded rapidly with the rise of industry. In addition, they were all of them younger men, in their twenties and thirties, often self-educated, with many intellectual attitudes and opinions in common. Except for a few rationalists and deists, the group was nonconformist in religion and this provided a common background. They had acquired a group cohesion through membership of bodies such as the Derby Philosophical Society and had come together as a politically self-conscious group on local improvement committees.[5]

Several of the leading members of the Derby Society for Political Information had close connections with industry. The chairman, though not by any means the most important member, was Samuel Fox, only twenty-five years old in 1791. He was not a manufacturer himself, but came of old nonconformist tradesman stock and had married into the important radical and industrialist family, the Strutts.[6]

The two cotton manufacturers, William and Joseph Strutt, were representative members of the new industrial middle class and probably the most important members of the society. The sons of a self-made millionaire,

[4] Proceedings of the Association for Constitutional Information, 27 February 1792. Fitzwilliam (Wentworth Woodhouse) Muniments, F44a, in Sheffield Central Library.
[5] F. Strutt, *Memoir of William Strutt*, 17. DBL.
[6] S. Glover, *History of the county of Derby*, 1829, II, 583-4.

they combined their public duties with the day-to-day management of the family firm. Both had been educated at nonconformist schools and were keen Unitarians. They were essentially moderate reformers, who wanted to use constitutional methods to achieve their ends.

The Derby society included a number of journalists — these were, possibly significantly, lacking in Chesterfield — and they made a big contribution to its activities. The most prominent of these in Derby was William Ward. The son of a builder of Burton-on-Trent, who had died when William was a young boy, he had been a travelling lay preacher from an early age. Largely self-educated, at some point in the late 1780s he became an apprentice to the proprietor of the *Derby Mercury*. In the year of the foundation of the society, he was 21 and had been writing articles and poems on social and political topics for the paper for several years. Like the Strutts, Ward was moderate and consistent in his political opinions.[7]

In contrast to Ward was another young radical journalist, Charles Sambroke Ordoyno, a very unstable character. Of Dutch ancestry, he established himself as a printer and bookseller in Derby in July 1791 and started a newspaper to compete with the Tory *Derby Mercury* in 1792, called the *Derby Herald*. This paper took a radical line, but its proprietor "loved ale more than republicanism", and it failed after only eight issues, whereupon Ordoyno left the town.[8]

Doctors as a professional group were represented in the Derby Political Society by Peter Crompton, who came of a respected family of Derby bankers, members of which had been active in the reform movement of the 1780s. He was "much given to controversy, a radical in politics and a Unitarian in religion" and held more extreme political views than most of the other leading members of the Derby society.[9]

The most distinguished member of the radical group at Derby was Erasmus Darwin, the son of a Nottinghamshire gentleman, who had turned to medicine as a profession and had settled at Derby in 1781. Aged 60 in 1791, he was older than the other Derby radicals. Intellectually he was a product of 18th-century enlightened rationalism, a deist in religion, and, in the best tradition of his age, a poet, man of letters, amateur inventor and scientist. He was in contact with many of the leading figures of his day and was regarded by Coleridge as "the first literary character in Europe". He desired reform and welcomed the French Revolution, as he had the American.[10]

The mainstay of the Derby Political Society were the moderate reformers, men such as the Strutts and William Ward. Like other such societies, however, the Derby group also attracted extremists. The most

7 S. Stennett, *Life of William Ward*, 1825, 6-12; J. C. Marshman, *The story of Carey, Marshman and Ward*, 1859, I, 94.
8 A. Wallis, "History of the printing press in Derbyshire", *D.A.J.*, III (1881), 150.
9 Material relating to Derbyshire persons, MS. in DBL.
10 A. Seward, *Memoirs of Dr. Darwin*, 1811, I, 151; G. Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian revolution*, 1959, 143; E. L. Griggs, *Collected letters of S. T. Coleridge*, 1956, I, 305.

outstanding was a man called Henry Redhead Yorke, who had been born in the West Indies, the natural son of a mulatto, and who had spent his boyhood and early youth in France and Switzerland. He came to live at Little Eaton, near Derby, where he was assumed to be a gentleman of independent means. He began his political career at the early age of twenty with a pamphlet against the unqualified abolition of the slave trade. He quickly changed his mind, however, and joined the Derby Political Society. Later his political aims and methods were much more extreme than those of anyone else in the Derby society.[11] The violence of his speech at the famous Castle Hill meeting at Sheffield on 7 April 1794 resulted in his arrest and imprisonment for sedition; when he emerged from prison in 1797, his views had changed completely and he had become a strong opponent of reform.[12]

Thus the Derby Political Society had an able middle-class leadership. However, the Political Society was not intended to be a small select group, but to appeal to a wider following, especially the industrial working class of the towns, as is demonstrated by its avowed aims and by certain features of its organization. The first statement of principles was drawn up at its inception in 1791, when the reformers were eager to emphasize the moderate nature of their aims. The sole object of the society, the reformers maintained, was to "arouse the People to a peaceable pursuit of Reforms in Government". The society did not at this stage give a detailed account of the reforms it desired. Thus the reformers did not specify the duration of a reformed parliament, but merely asked for "full, free and frequently elected representation". They also refrained altogether from mentioning purely social reform, as there were obvious advantages in this policy. The society had hardly had time to work out a detailed policy on the many items of social reform and to have committed itself to hasty formulations on these might have alienated certain reformers.

They were, nevertheless, much more radical than members of preceding reform movements. On the critical point of the vote, the aims of the Derby reformers were quite specific. They were in favour of universal manhood suffrage. The early commitment of the Political Society to this principle marked it out as being distinctly different from earlier reform movements in the county. The gentry of the 1780s, who had been so active in furthering economical and parliamentary reform, had never contemplated so radical a proposal. Speakers at their meetings had talked of inequality of representation, not of people, but of the landed property of the kingdom. Accordingly, they remained aloof from the Political Society of the 1790s which was essentially an urban phenomenon, controlled by the middle class but intended to attract the support of the industrial working classes.

11 PRO HO 42/31; S. Lee, ed., *Dictionary of National Biography*, 1888; H. Yorke, *Trial of Henry Yorke*, XIV-XVI, 1795; H. Yorke, *Thoughts on civil government*, 1794, Sheffield Local Pamphlets, 31, 27. E. Fearn, "Henry Redhead Yorke — radical traitor", *Y.A.J.*, XLII, part 166 (1968), 187-92.
12 Wentworth Woodhouse MSS., 44c.

The democratic aspirations of the Derby Political Society were also indicated by certain features of its organization revealed in the regulations of 1791. Whereas the great majority of societies, notably those at Manchester, were organized to suit a moderate, middle-class type of reformer and to exclude by a political test and a high subscription the extremist, working-class radical, the society at Derby copied the divisional type of organization, pioneered by the Sheffield society. The membership of the society was to be split up into divisions, each consisting of ten people, who would elect one delegate each to a committee which ran the society. The aim of this was to ensure an efficient organization for what was obviously intended to be a rapidly expanding society, recruiting a large working-class membership. New divisions could be added, as the size of the society increased.

Another indication that the Derby society was intended to appeal to a working-class, rather than merely a middle-class membership was its low subscription. Predominantly middle-class societies such as the Manchester Constitutional Society charged a subscription of half a guinea, paid annually. The membership subscription of the Derby society was much lower, only two shillings per year, paid quarterly. The Derby Philosophical Society, the scientific society of which most of the middle-class leadership were members, charged an annual membership subscription of one and a half guineas. In the standing orders of the society were regulations that had not seemed necessary in the case of the middle-class Philosophical Society. One required that "disorderly persons after three reprimands from the chairman of the division shall be ordered to withdraw and the latter laid before the committee".

From the beginning the society was quite explicit about its major aim — the reform of parliament, and particularly an extension of the franchise to all adult males. It was quite clear too on the type of organization required to recruit a large working-class membership so as to bring the pressure of public opinion to bear on the government to carry through a reform. How precisely reform ideas were to be propagated the society was, in the early stages, much less clear. The regulations of 1791 did state that the society intended to avoid violent methods and that it would "promote and petition" for a reform of parliament. Assertions of moderation were, however, the common property of nearly all political movements and the petition was the classic culmination of activity for reform. The methods adopted over the next two years were, in fact, a reflection of the progress it was making and are best examined as part of that progress. Several broad methods of approach were possible. Thus the society could seek publicity for its aims through meetings of various kinds. Such parts of its proceedings as the society wished to advertise widely could then be printed, either in the form of pamphlets or in the newspapers. Finally, it could seek to establish relations with other reform groups so as to exert a more general influence on politics.

The Derby society was well equipped to pursue these particular

methods. Many of its leading members were confident, practised speakers. Henry Yorke was particularly adept at the emotional type of oratory acceptable at an open air mass meeting. He was considered by Joseph Gales, the Sheffield radical, to be "one of the finest orators of the Kingdom".[13] William Ward was another outstanding publicist. His oratory, a biographer noted, "was animated and striking. There are still some living, who heard him in his younger days and well remember the impression that was produced, scarcely, indeed, inferior to the excitement effected by the most popular preacher of the day".[14] Finally, many of the other members, notably Joseph Strutt, had had considerable practice at public meetings.

The society was also well placed for gaining publicity through the written word. Erasmus Darwin was a highly gifted author with marked literary and intellectual ability. Even more valuable in a controversial capacity was the journalist, William Ward, who wrote its documents and petitions. In addition he used his position as editor of the *Derby Mercury* (1789-91) to further reform ideas. Before his appointment the proprietor had been content to quote extracts from the London newspapers with an occasional comment on local news of exceptional interest. Ward, however, introduced original and radical leading articles, some supporting the French Revolution in its early stages and others relief for dissenters and parliamentary reform. Moreover, the paper came out strongly against the instigators of the Priestley riots in 1791. Undoubtedly such articles, though very general in nature and not designed to further the political society as such, did make for a more favourable attitude towards reform locally.[15] The Derbyshire societies also circulated reform pamphlets fairly thoroughly. Thus the Loyal Association of Belper, meeting in February 1793 to express its attachment to the constitution, referred to the "pernicious opinions which have of late been industriously circulated by pamphlets . . . with a tendency to disturb the gentle tranquillity of this neighbourhood".[16] These were probably the abridged copies of Paine's *Rights of Man* sent out to the provinces by the London societies.

Whilst the society's main activity was to organize local support for reform, the various societies were aiming to establish close connections with each other so that their co-ordinated petitions to parliament could exert their maximum influence. Derbyshire links with other societies were established from an early date, mainly through Henry Yorke because of his unusual background and willingness to travel. The Derby society had a constitution very closely modelled on that of the society in Sheffield, which had been formed shortly before, and close links between the two societies were maintained. Yorke began to attend meetings in Sheffield, where he made a very good impression on the reformers, and in March 1793 he transferred his membership.[17] He continued however to travel

[13] J. Holland and J. Everett, *Life and times of James Montgomery*, 1869, 1, 167.
[14] Stennett, 237.
[15] *Derby Mercury*, 7, 14, 28 January, 7 October 1790; 28 July 1791.
[16] *Derby Mercury*, 7 February 1793.
[17] *State Trials*, XXV, 604; Yorke, *Trial*, 143.

between the two towns and also visited Manchester from time to time. Many connections between the radical societies centred on the plan for a convention of reformers in Edinburgh in the autumn of 1793. On 29 August one Home Office informant in Kendal reported having seen a letter from the secretary of the reform society in Newcastle telling "a member of the Derby corps of conspirators that such intended convention was postponed until they had a full account of the proceedings of the Belfast club after the rising of the Irish parliament".[18] Yorke attended the Edinburgh convention as a delegate of the London Corresponding Society, returning to Sheffield when it was broken up by the arrest of several leading reformers.[19]

Provincial societies had other links with those in London and in some cases very tenuous ones with the radical movement in France. As early as May 1792 the Derby society was mentioned with fifteen others as having contact with the London Corresponding Society. In June the societies in both Derby and Belper were on its mailing list and receiving supplies of pamphlets. As late as August 1793 the Constitutional Society was trying to renew correspondence with societies, like that in Derby, with which it had lost contact.[20] Henry Yorke, a member of the London Corresponding Society as well as of the societies in Derby and Sheffield, made far-ranging tours to link the various centres. In 1792 he and an unidentified person went from Derby to Paris, where he remained for some weeks, mixed in revolutionist circles and became on his own admission "madly in love with ideal liberty". In November 1793 he told the London Corresponding Society that he was going to Belgium to head the French army and hoped that the English radicals "would be ripe for Christmas and he should come at the head of them to England".[21] He may well have made several visits to the continent at this period. Magistrates searching for him in Manchester in June 1794 found letters showing that he had "long been employed as an emissary from France to sow the seeds of discord in this country" and that he was contemplating a further visit to France.[22] Significantly these longer journeys were made concurrently with shorter ones between the various centres of reform activity in England. Yorke was thus unusually well placed to act as an intermediary.

In the early months of the Derby Political Society, in the winter and spring of 1792, the atmosphere was still very favourable to the broad course of events in France and to the possibilities of reform at home. The optimism of reformers was well expressed by Erasmus Darwin when he wrote, "In spite of all disasters the cause of freedom will triumph and France become ere long an example, prosperous as great, to the surround-

18 James Greene from Kendal, PRO. HO 42/26.
19 W. H. G. Armytage, "Editorial experiences of Joseph Gates", *North Carolina Historical Review*, July 1951, 353.
20 W. Cobbett, *History of parliament*, XXXI, 480, 764, 828-9.
21 Yorke, *Trial*, XIII-XIV; *State Trials*, XXIV, 640.
22 PRO. HO 42/31.

ing nations."[23] Opponents of reform were just as aware of the extent of support for reform locally. At this time the rector of Morley, near Derby, was writing, "In no part of the kingdom have they more disaffected persons than in the town and neighbourhood of Derby, from whence they have actually sent two persons to the national convention of France to invite the French over to this country . . ."[24]

The activity of both the Belper and Derby societies in these months is indicated by the addresses they published. The Belper society, founded only in January, had established its basic organization by March and published an address. The Derby society did not adopt an address until July, but it was an extremely thoughtful and detailed one showing the extent of discussion in the society during its first six months.[25] Neither society was yet seeking publicity for its meetings, but rather both seem to have been waiting for a lead from other societies, particularly the London Corresponding Society. The Belper society had sent its address to the London society by way of Sheffield in March, and Yorke had been to Sheffield, London and Paris on the Derby society's behalf. Reform pamphlets were being sent from London to Derby by May.

Activities began to be pursued more openly in Derbyshire in the summer of 1792, following the lead given by the London societies. An obvious opportunity to give voice to reform opinions was the second anniversary of the storming of the Bastille. The society at Derby held what seems to have been its first public meeting at the Talbot Inn on 16 July when an address was agreed on. Its terms indirectly throw light on the society's organization. Its outstanding characteristic was the obvious confidence with which it had been drawn up. The general tone was much more radical than the first statement of aims in 1791. The *Morning Chronicle,* which published it in December, was prosecuted for a seditious libel, though the action was unsuccessful. The pamphlet was the work of William Ward, and undoubtedly, as his biographer pointed out, "the vigour of language and the bitterness of spirit", characteristic of his writings, helped to gain it the attention it received from ministers of the crown.[26] On specific points also the address was more radical; the call for annual parliaments aligned the Derby reformers with the more definitely radical societies.

From its beginnings the Derby society had been intended to be essentially a popular body with a large working-class membership. Certain features of the July address, when compared with earlier statements, suggest that an even stronger bid was being made for such support.[27] The appeal for

[23] E. Krause, *Erasmus Darwin,* 1879, 45.
[24] *V.C.H. Derby,* 1907, II, 150-1.
[25] *To the friends of free enquiry and the general good,* 16 July 1792. DBL 86.
[26] *State Trials,* XXII, 953-1023; Marshman, I, 94. The defending counsel said that the paper was "rumoured to come from the pen of a writer whose productions justly entitle him to rank as the first poet of the age", i.e. Erasmus Darwin, *State Trials,* XXII, 1008. The *Derby Mercury,* 19 December 1793, argued that it had been written "by a youth to whom Nature alone has been bountiful and whose genius has not been improved by the refinements of a liberal education". The prosecution thought it had been fabricated in London. PRO. TS 11/1003/3834.
[27] *The Derby address,* 16 July 1792, 3.

reform of parliamentary representation, formerly based on a political theory of individual rights, was now sustained by more down to earth economic arguments; it was held that it was deplorable that "the labourer must give his money to afford the means of preventing him having a voice in its disposal". A much broader range of reforms, social as well as political, was advocated, concerning taxation, the game laws, the criminal law, education and religious discrimination. The address re-emphasized the need for contact between the different reform societies, ending with an appeal to "the friends of freedom through Great Britain to form similar societies and to act with unanimity and firmness". July 1792, in fact, marked the high tide of the reform movement in Derbyshire. The success of the French armies and the further progress of the revolution caused public opinion to harden against reform, and the government began to take active measures against radical societies. The proclamation against wicked and seditious writings of 21 May was followed more secretly by reports on the activities of the reformers. "The proceedings of these clubs," the Home Office noted in December 1793, "have been constantly conveyed to the government from the autumn of 1792 when they first began to make themselves formidable."[28]

In the country at large organized opposition to reform was expressed in meetings at which addresses of loyalty were adopted. These gave a good indication of the strength of reaction in different areas. In Derbyshire, the first was that from the Chesterfield district late in June, followed a week later by the county as a whole.[29] The places which had radical societies were the last to adopt such addresses. Thus Derby was one of the towns that the Home Office noted had omitted to send in an address of loyalty by September 1792. With Belper, it did so only in December six months later than Chesterfield and the county area.[30] The growing hostility to reform was expressed at some meetings by the burning of effigies of Tom Paine, and it was not confined to men of property. In November, William Strutt tried to spread reform opinions by distributing copies of Paine's *Rights of Man* among his factory workers at Belper and many of the self-employed nailers of the district. A newspaper report noted that, "A few days later his mills were flooded and the people then having had time to consider Paine's doctrines, they arose, called a meeting and resolved that they wanted nothing and were determined to live under the present constitution and burnt Paine's *Rights of Man.*"[31]

In the face of this public reaction the reformers tried to rid reform proposals of the seditious overtones which their opponents had given them. In Derby they made use of a loyalist meeting to do this in December. Not only did reformers join in calling the meeting, but after the usual speeches and motions on loyalty an anonymous "friend of parliamentary

28 PRO. HO 42/27.
29 *Derby Mercury,* 28 June 1792.
30 List of proclamation addresses, PRO. HO 42/21; *Derby Mercury,* 3 January and 7 February 1793.
31 *Manchester Mercury,* 13 November 1792.

reform'' emphasized that, far from being economic levellers as was alleged, they wanted equality of rights only, not of property.[32] However, despite the pains taken by the reformers to ward off accusations of treason, opposition to them became increasingly violent, and by the early summer of 1793 the Derbyshire reform movement had ended. The gradual cessation of activities followed a definite pattern: they continued longest in those places where radical ideas had gained support early and flourished. At Chesterfield there had never been a reform organization. When in January 1793 Samuel Rotherham of Dronfield personally staged a demonstration there was an immediate reaction. A procession of his servants carried an effigy of Edmund Burke through the streets of Chesterfield and burned it in front of Rotherham's house. His fellow magistrates were incensed at his action, particularly as he had used his authority as a magistrate to order the town constables to protect the procession, and they removed his name from the committee of the Chesterfield association for drawing up loyal addresses.[33] No further attempts were made to popularize reform in the town.

In districts with a stronger radical tradition also, opponents of reform were adopting a more hostile attitude. At a meeting on 7 February at a Belper chapel, called to present a loyal address to the king, loyalists and reformers clashed, and though no blows were struck the arguments became so violent that the minister of the chapel refused to chair the meeting, which continued without him. Eventually the reformers withdrew, and the loyalists passed their resolutions, some obviously aimed at the local reform society. The intense hostility they now encountered seems to have deterred the Belper reformers from any further exposition of their views. They prudently stayed away from a meeting on 4 March called to celebrate ''the downfall of Tom Paine'', and there is no later record of meetings of the Belper society, which must have come to an end shortly after this date.

In the borough of Derby, where there was less organized opposition, the Political Society continued with its activities, but reform views were expressed more defensively and gradually modified. During February and March a petition to parliament was being prepared, but plans were affected by the very real possibility of war with France. At a general meeting of the different divisions of the society in Derby on 25 February an address of congratulation was drawn up to Charles James Fox on his opposition to war with France. This document however, with its stress on the historical respectability of Fox's stand, showed the prevailing more defensive tone. A parody of this address, published shortly afterwards by an opponent of reform, provoked an extremely good satirical reply entitled *Encomiastic advice* by Philo Filmer (probably William Ward).[34]

32 *Derby Mercury*, 10 January 1793.

33 *Derby Mercury*, 31 January 1793. Samuel Rotherham was not a member of either of the Derbyshire societies but may have belonged to that in Sheffield.

34 *Encomiastic advice to the acute and ingenious personage who parodied the address from the Derby societies to the Rt. Hon. Charles James Fox*, London, 1793. DBL 86.

This contained a re-statement of the society's policy, which though not expressing views different from those of July 1792, did by omission and altered emphasis suggest that because of public opinion the Derby reformers felt compelled to moderate the expression of their beliefs. They were now more concerned to maintain their right to express their views than to define them. The precise nature of the parliamentary reform they desired was not stated, and pains were taken to stress that the reformers were neither republicans nor levellers.

In the spring of 1795, with the country at war, the local reform societies were in a difficult position. Thomas Hardy, the secretary of the London Corresponding Society, wrote on 23 March, "The country associations goes on bravely. They are all preparing petitions to parliament."[35] By these petitions moderate reformers hoped to provoke discussion of reform. The Derby society retained faith in this traditional procedure and presented to parliament on 9 May a petition which, along with many others, was rejected without comment.[36] The more radical tone of the petition from Sheffield did, on the other hand, provoke a short debate. Indeed it has been suggested that the more militant Sheffield reformers had deliberately framed their petition so as to ensure its rejection and convince people that more drastic methods of obtaining reform were required.[37] Though both societies demanded similar reforms, there were significant variations in the arguments used for them. Thus the Derby reformers found their justification for annual parliaments, in traditional Whig fashion, "in the principles of the British constitution", in particular of the revolution of 1688, whilst the Sheffield radicals preferred to base their demand on more general principles of political representation. The Derby petition attacked the inequality of the electoral system, but, unlike that from Sheffield, significantly made no specific reference to universal suffrage, which in 1791 and 1792 had figured quite prominently in the aims of the Derby society.

For the Derby reformers, as for other moderate societies, the early summer of 1793 marked the culmination of their activities. After the rejection of their petitions, such societies were faced with the choice of pursuing their aims by less constitutional methods or abandoning their organized attempts at reform. In Sheffield where the struggle was carried on into 1794 and 1795, preparations were made for the use of physical force, but the Derby society, like most moderate societies, chose the second course and discontinued all its activities. Joseph Strutt, in giving evidence at the trial of Thomas Hardy in 1794, implied that the collapse of the Derby society followed immediately after the rejection of its petition in May 1793. When asked whether they had intended to secure reforms by force, Strutt replied, "O dear, no — so far from it that our society has never met since the petition to parliament was rejected."[38] From

[35] Letter book of the London Corresponding Society. Place papers, 27811, British Museum.
[36] *Journal of the House of Commons*, 48, 734; *History of parliament*, XXX, 775-7.
[37] G. P. Jones, "The political reform movement in Sheffield", *Trans. Hunter Arch. Soc.*, IV (1937), 62.
[38] *State Trials*, XXIV, 1099.

that time the Sheffield society was increasingly isolated, so that in November its secretary was complaining that the societies with whom they had formerly corresponded "have been remarkably remiss in their communication for several months past; to many we have addressed more than one or two without receiving any answers".[39]

There were definite reasons for the disbandment of the reform movement in Derbyshire. Because of the nature of the industrial organization of Belper and Derby, the two societies never obtained the popular support they had hoped for. Their mainly middle-class founders had hoped to attract a large working-class membership, and, with this end, had adopted the divisional type of organization most suited to rapid expansion. Though there is no exact evidence of the size of the two societies, they clearly did not grow as had been hoped. Whilst in Sheffield the number of divisions increased until there was a membership of 2,000 to 3,000 by October 1792,[40] there is no record of any addition to the original divisions in Derby or Belper. A rough indication of the size of various provincial reform societies can be obtained from the records of the Society for Constitutional Information of London, which give the distribution figures of printed copies of a letter of Thomas Paine's to other societies in June 1792. The Derby and Belper societies were sent 200 copies as was the London Corresponding Society, which then had over 100 members.[41] It seems likely that the Derby society was appreciably smaller, and in October 1792 a Home Office memorandum classed the Belper society as definitely a small one.[42]

Although Derby and Belper, with populations of 10,832 and 4,509 respectively in the 1801 census, were the most industrialized places in the county, they were very small when compared with Sheffield, which at the same date had a population of 31,314. Moreover, the self-employed cutlers and other tradesmen of Sheffield working in their own workshops were renowned for their independence of attitude.[43] In Derby and Belper, on the other hand, the predominant cotton industry had imposed the disciplined life of the factory, and the former had the more diversified occupational structure of a county town. More generally the workers in these towns seem to have been less politically conscious than the Sheffield cutlers, as their reaction to William Strutt's distribution of Paine's *Rights of Man* showed.

Largely because the Derbyshire societies did not attract a large membership, their aims and methods were not as radical as they might have been. The extremists in Derby had very early left the field clear for the moderates: Ordoyno, for example, left Derby in the spring of 1792, and Yorke

[39] *History of parliament*, XXXI, 833.
[40] List of associations for relief of pretended grievances. PRO. HO 42/22.
[41] Letter book of London Corresponding Society. Place papers, 27811, B.M.
[42] PRO. HO 42/22.
[43] PRO. HO 42/20. Report of Colonel de Lancey: "As the wages given to the journeymen are very high, it is pretty generally the practice of them to work for 3 days in which they earn sufficient for them to drink and riot for the rest of the week."

transferred his membership to the Sheffield society early in 1793.[44] The Derby society was increasingly sensitive to the public reaction against programmes for political reform, particularly after the outbreak of war with France. Though it continued longer than the society in Belper its earlier radical views had been significantly moderated by the spring of 1793. The alacrity with which it was disbanded after the rejection of its petition to parliament in May finally demonstrated the essentially cautious character it had then assumed.

44 Wallis, *D.A.J.*, III (1881), 247-8; Taylor, *Trans. Hunter Arch. Soc.*, V (1943), 136, 145; *State Trials*, XXV, 119.