

MOORS, FIELDS, AND POPULAR PROTEST IN SOUTH LANCASHIRE AND THE
WEST RIDING OF YORKSHIRE, 1800-1848*

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On 4 October 1819, a public meeting was held on Skircoat Moor, two miles south of Halifax in Yorkshire. The event was one of several around the country organized by local radicals to petition for parliamentary reform and to protest against the ‘Peterloo massacre’ that had occurred in Manchester that August. Radical societies from most of the surrounding villages carried over seventy elaborate banners and sixteen ‘caps of liberty’ to the platform. The crowd was addressed by the three Mancunian radical orators, Knight, Saxton and Mitchell, who recounted the horrors they had seen on the field of St Peter’s. The *Manchester Observer* gave a detailed account of the elaborate processions that climbed Skircoat Moor that afternoon:

The appearance from the front of the hustings of the approaching multitude surpassed everything the mind can conceive; the hedges and trees seemed all in motion, and when we even now contemplate the grand and imposing spectacle, it has more the appearance of a dream than a circumstance of reality.¹

Of course, this description was in part hyperbole from an ambitious journalist at an avowedly sympathetic radical newspaper. Nevertheless, it points to significant features of mass meetings which resonated with contemporary observers and participants. The

crowds, as a moving and physical mass, were integral to the appearance of the event. The landscape contributed to this extraordinary atmosphere as both venue and as symbol. The meeting was a spectacle: its large scale and elaborate rituals made it a hyper-real or sublime experience for observers and even more so for participants. The moor stood apart and above from the magistrates, manufacturers, and other inhabitants anxiously observing from the town below.

This article argues that moors and fields in south Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire were integral to the symbolism of political and social agitation during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The landscape formed the foreground rather than merely the background to protest. The association of particular moors with protest became established in local, and increasingly national, radical collective memory during this period. Skircoat Moor, Hartshead Moor near Huddersfield, and Kersal Moor near Manchester, were the most prominent among sites that gained a history of political agitation. The ways in which local inhabitants symbolized such moors in protests, and interacted with moors in their everyday life, reveals another insight into the culture of popular politics. Political actions and identities were shaped not just by the principles and ideologies transmitted through texts and speeches, but also by the landscape forming a visual and physical reminder of social structures and a history of conflicts over the freedom to meet as well as speak.

Fig. 1. Sites of Protest

Studies of popular politics in this period often regard geographical surroundings as a mere background to action and change. William Sewell and James Epstein have therefore called for greater attention to be paid to the environment and its role in popular protest, both as context and as actor.² Mark Harrison, Peter Borsay, and John Barrell have surveyed the impact of civic building in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They argue that local authorities and landowners, out of fear of ‘the mob’, began to restrict the types of political activity that could take place within urban spaces. Radical groups and trade unions found it increasingly difficult to meet in public places. This process was compounded by government legislation, especially the ‘Two Acts’ of 1795 and the notorious ‘Six Acts’ of 1819, which codified large meetings together with anti-government writings as ‘seditious’ unless proved innocent. In effect, loyalist elites were gaining hegemony over the political public sphere.³ This urban exclusivity, though by no means total or complete, in part explains why political groups looked to hills and fields for protest venues. There were nevertheless wider reasons behind protestors’ use of semi-rural space, especially the development of political histories about such sites in collective memory, and the effects of enclosure upon inhabitants’ mobility and on their perceptions of the landscape.

This article surveys moors and fields as symbol, as spectacle, and as part of everyday life. Only a few historians of popular protest have followed the crowds beyond the towns in northern England. In their accounts of Chartism, James Vernon and Paul Pickering have briefly underlined the role of moors around Oldham and Manchester respectively. They argue that the moorland environment contributed to a sense of collective identity among attenders at demonstrations.⁴ We should place these case

studies within a wider Pennine context and within a longer political history. This article also draws upon the work of James Epstein, Alexander Tyrell, and Robert Poole on the rich culture of symbols and rituals of popular politics during the ‘age of reform’.⁵

Landscape should be placed solidly within this political repertoire. The routes and topography of the moors and fields became as symbolic as the torn flags of Peterloo or the tunes played by the brass bands at such events. Protesters represented and signified landscape in symbolic ways: signs which many historians have neglected or regarded as incidental. However, we also must not ignore the ‘complicated material dimensions to the sign’.⁶ The symbolism of place came to the fore in demonstrations and overt protests, but the actions of the crowd were also shaped by the culture of ‘everyday life’, that is, their connections with the landscape experienced in work, leisure, and religion. Set piece protests were only the outward signs of more deep set and continual forms of resistance enacted in the often hidden forms and daily uses of the moors.⁷

Moors and fields were primary venues for protest for three reasons. Firstly, they were able to accommodate the mass meeting, one of the most popular tactics of political and social movements in this period. Moors offered a feasible alternative when urban protests were confined for lack of space or during periods when local and national government restricted the types of activity that could occur in urban ‘public’ spaces. Secondly, agitation often took place in what magistrate and newspaper reports termed the ‘neighbourhood’ of towns. It is in the Pennine villages close to, but still distinct from, the large industrial towns that E. P. Thompson found the occupational structures, traditions, religious practices, and sense of community which could, with the addition of political radicalism, foster class identities. The ‘neighbourhood’ contained a total ‘critical mass’ of

population that was dispersed among individual yet connected communities. This unique combination fostered a sense of independence among its inhabitants.⁸ Finally, protests on moors and fields illustrate the complex nature of popular politics in this period. They were extraordinary symbolic spectacles yet they also replicated the familiar and accessible culture of everyday life.

I

The tumult of the French Revolution and the wide distribution of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* inspired political activity of all kinds in the manufacturing areas of the southern Pennines.⁹ Most of this activity was deemed 'Jacobinical' by local authorities, a judgement supported by the 'Two Acts' of 1795, which prohibited 'seditious' meetings as well as writings. Magistrates were able to contain radical activity within the public spaces of towns; the 'neighbourhood' was, however, more difficult to police. The topography of the moors, with their wooded valleys and steep ascents, could be a convenient cloak from the authorities. The republican cells of the United Englishmen, formed on the model of the United Irishmen, met clandestinely in concealed parts of the hills between 1799 and 1802. The southern Pennines were especially amenable to such illicit activity because they formed the meeting point of, or no-man's land between, many parish and, indeed, county boundaries. This jurisdictional ambiguity allowed the opportunity for anyone running from the authorities to slip over county boundaries to avoid arrest. For example, in May 1801, United Englishmen republicans planned a meeting to occur on Chew Wells, on the Lancashire-Yorkshire border on Saddleworth

moor. The Lancashire magistrates warned their Yorkshire colleagues that the site ‘lies three Miles Right up the Valley very Rocky and Hilly all the Way...is almost inaccessible for Horse’. The convenors got wind of the authorities’ preparations and changed the venue to Rivington Pike, overlooking Horwich, because ‘there was a place behind the Pike where the Horse could not travel’.¹⁰ These areas were liminal and permeable, and more amenable to radical activity because their dispersed population and bleak aspect contributed to the feeling of being on the margins or outwith the law.

One common feature of reports by magistrates and military about such meetings was their sense of powerlessness against the seemingly mercurial crowds. Less clandestinely, protestors employed the hills as visual taunts against the authorities. They were able to combine anonymity with visibility of the large crowds seen from a distance from the town below. On 3 May 1801, a radical meeting, attracting hundreds, if not thousands, of people, was held at Buckton Castle hill, on the borders of Lancashire, Cheshire, and Yorkshire. Reverend William Robert Hay, head of the Salford bench of magistrates, headed out with his colleagues and some military to disperse the crowds. On arrival, he ‘there found a considerable assemblage of people in waiting and saw others in very large groups on the adjoining hills’. He claimed ‘it was nearly two hours before we succeeded in clearing the Hills immediately round and the people were no sooner driven from one than they took station on another hill and seemed to hold us at defiance’.¹¹

Anna Clark has commented on this episode in her exploration of the symbolism of the individual body and gender in such protests, though it is clear that the interaction of the crowds with the environment against their pursuers is also a prominent feature here.¹² The protesters used the topography of the landscape as a tool, and more powerfully so

when their knowledge of short cuts and footpaths was seemingly greater than that of the urban magistrates.

Political groups wishing to be regarded as legitimate by the authorities were more inclined to use moors and fields on the outskirts of the major towns in east Lancashire, north Cheshire, and the West Riding, accessible from the 'neighbourhood' by footpaths and turnpikes. These sites hosted protests that were meant to be seen. Prior to the end of the French Wars in 1815, food rioters, strikers, and political demonstrators generally assembled on moors then paraded into the town, regrouped in the marketplace or around a mill, then either dispersed or processed back out to the moor. The brief restoration of Habeas Corpus in 1800 led to a burst of radical meetings, which were bold and forthright in their use of the environment against the authorities attempting to suppress them. From then onwards and particularly after 1815, the moor began to form the main focus of action rather than just the initial meeting place. The elaborate processions to the meetings were a product of the more confident and organized nature of 'mass platform' radicals, Chartists, and trade unions.

Protesters' tactics were even bolder in areas within easier reach of the main towns than the Pennines. What is significant is the long history of activity on these moors and fields on the boundaries of townships or parishes. The first mass political meeting on Skircoat Moor took place on 18 August 1819. Radicals from Halifax and its surrounding villages met on the plain at the moor top to hear news about 'Peterloo', which had occurred two days previously. After the October 1819 meeting, overt radical activity was intermittent and occurred within Halifax centre. Twenty years later, a new generation of radicals revitalized the significance of the moor and its political heritage.¹³ Skircoat

hosted a ‘monster meeting’ during Whit weekend in 1839 as part of the great Chartist push for the national convention. The moor saw further meetings at the height of the ‘plug’ strikes on 15 and 16 August 1842, again on 1 November 1847, and culminated with the ‘great West Riding demonstration’ on Good Friday 1848.¹⁴

Hartshead Moor, also known as ‘Peep Green’, eight miles east of Skircoat, shared a similar political history. It was the venue for nightly meetings of the republican United Englishmen in 1801 and was a reputed drilling-ground for Luddites in 1811-12. Luddites broke up two wagon loads of frames destined for manufacturer William Cartwright’s mill on the moor in early 1812. After an attempt upon Cartwright’s life, they succeeded in shooting dead another manufacturer, William Horsfall, on nearby Crossfield Moor a few days later.¹⁵ Hartshead Moor was the venue for a mass anti-New Poor Law demonstration in May 1838, and hosted the ‘great meeting of the Ultra-Radicals of the West Riding’ on 15 October 1838. Chartists held a monster meeting there in conjunction with Skircoat during Whit weekend 1839, and celebrated the French Revolution on the moor in 1848.¹⁶

Kersal Moor, the race course and military muster ground on the north-west outskirts of Manchester, was the venue for small meetings of striking handloom weavers during their campaign for a minimum wage in 1808, then for striking spinners’ meetings in 1818 and again in 1831. The site then became well known for Chartist monster meetings in September 1838, Whitsun 1839, and during the plug strikes of 1842.¹⁷

Lancashire Hill on the outskirts of Stockport, Hunslet Moor near Leeds, Oldham Edge and Greenacres Moor outside Oldham, Tandle Hill in Royton, and Grange Moor near Wakefield, were among other sites of political protest from the 1800s until the end of Chartism in 1848 or later.¹⁸

The opportunity to hold meetings often relied on differing contexts of local landowning and authority, which indicate why some areas were more active than others. The radical meetings on Skircoat Moor in 1819 were saved from military dispersal by the reformist Halifax magistrate and overseer of the poor, Michael Stocks, whom the Manchester radical leaders had called upon to persuade of their legality.¹⁹ Activists often instigated a complex or repeated process of negotiation with local authorities to hold meetings.²⁰ More forthright efforts by radicals to gain control over moors briefly succeeded in Oldham and Todmorden. In Oldham, local radicals gained representation in the vestry; they were thus able to appoint special constables to defend rather than put down demonstrations on Bent Green and Greenacres Moor in 1816.²¹ In February 1843, Todmorden Chartists successfully commandeered the post of township constable for Langfield. The office had powers to call public meetings in the township, of which they took full advantage over 1843-4; hence camp meetings were held at Stoodley Pike from 1843.²²

Mass meetings formed part of a wider contestation over the meanings of space, contests in which groups hoped that claiming the meaning of a place could lead them to claim ownership of that space. Radical groups and trade unions did so in two ways: firstly by subverting place with prior connotations, and secondly by finding their own, virgin spaces to input and disseminate their own histories and values. These battles over spaces were exemplified in Manchester. Prior to 1815, radicals attempted to hold public meetings on sites that were built and used by the authorities for civic events and shows of wealth and authority, for example, at the fashionable suburb of Ardwick Green.²³ After the war, a new generation of radicals chose to meet on new sites, devoid of such prior

political histories. From 1816, radicals conducted the ‘mass platform’ on St Peter’s Fields. The ‘Blanketeers’ set off from the site on their ill-fated march to parliament in 1817. The location of the mass meetings in August 1819 already highlighted the site’s radical connotations before the ‘massacre’ served to establish St Peter’s Fields as the foremost place of political action.²⁴ Other groups chose different sites to claim as their own. Handloom weavers met on St George’s Fields near Ancoats during their strike and campaign for minimum wage legislation in May 1808, and the site subsequently became synonymous with trade union protest. Major meetings were held there during the powerloom strikes of 1826, again in 1829, and then throughout the 1830s and 1840s. Their choice was most likely aided by the site’s proximity to the factory district of Ancoats, though textile workers from across the city attended these meetings. It also later became a site of Irish sectarian agitation because of the nearby Irish areas and building of St Patrick’s church on the edge of the site.²⁵

Many of the places chosen for political meetings were held on commons or wasteland threatened with enclosure or urban development. In Lancashire more than forty enclosure acts, public and private, were passed from 1789 to 1815.²⁶ Hartshead Moor enclosure act was passed in 1802 and awarded in 1806, although its implementation only took place from 1838. Nearby Grange Moor was enclosed between 1821 and 1824. The enclosure of Skircoat Moor began in 1838 but was contested by freeholders in December 1842. The threat of enclosure highlighted the significance of the space, its meanings and uses, without preventing meetings in practice. By order of the lord of the manor and main landowner, Sir George Savile, the plain of Skircoat Moor top was kept as commons and

set out in promenades and roads, which became Savile Park. It thereby remained available as a space for demonstrations.²⁷

The threat of enclosure rather than its implementation, however, lay behind some moorland protests. Most enclosures were protracted and direct resistance was usually conducted in the courts rather than in the field.²⁸ Patrick Joyce and John Barrell have identified how local and national elites rationalized the forms and structure of public space during the early nineteenth century.²⁹ This process of rationalization was carried out in practice not just by the building of civic buildings in towns, but also by the building of roads. The old networks of parish roads and footpaths were replaced firstly by turnpikes, then by roads created by enclosures and by a national road system instigated in 1835. In enclosures where the major landowners and lords of the manor had the largest share of the plots, they symbolically made a mark on the landscape using roads to emphasize the direction of wealth over those of popular use or tradition. This process of the increasing privatization of communications appeared to culminate in the Stopping Up of Unnecessary Roads Act of 1815. Though it required two justices of the peace to agree to road closures, the legislation quickly became merely a rubber stamp for landowners' bringing about permanent changes in the landscape.³⁰

It is no co-incidence that veterans of the radical associations of the 1810s became heavily involved in forming societies for the preservation of footpaths in York (established 1824) and Manchester (1826). The latter society formed in response to the actions of Ralph Wright, a magistrate and landowner at Flixton, who ploughed up footpaths running across his estate. The case against him reached the King's Bench, and was the first victory of the campaign.³¹ The development of such societies was not just a

reflection of working-class resentment against their exclusion from the landscape by the propertied; it also evinced radical leaders' conscious awareness of or attachment to the countryside. John Barrell and Rachel Crawford's studies of Georgian poetry indicate how this period saw the emergence of a romantic nostalgic longing for 'a rural England of small holdings and independent men'. James Vernon has argued that mass meetings on Oldham Moors 'drew upon the popular mythology of the land', that is, the common trope of the 'plundering Norman aristocracy depriving the people of their freeborn rights as Englishmen dispossesses them in their own land'.³² Although this connection should not be taken too directly, the land could be a useful metonym for liberty. A hymn sung at Chartist camp meetings on Cronkeyshaw Common in Rochdale, for example, lamented:

They call the earth and land their own
And they give us back a stone.³³

The processions to moors were a product of the changing meanings of roads and of walking. What mattered most to radical leaders and organizers was landowning interference in their freedom of movement. The contested nature of new networks of communications had already been demonstrated in 1757, when anti-turnpike riots swept the Bradford district.³⁴ Privatized or toll roads were similar to hedges in being material as well as symbolic restrictions on movement. Fences and walls stopping up footpaths were pulled down by individuals and groups in places close to the sites of mass meetings, including Scholes Green, Cleckheaton, in 1806; Royton Lane, Oldham, 1834; and Lower Moor, Oldham, 1842.³⁵ Lord Sheffield's fir plantation on Tandle Hill in Royton, planted

in 1825-6, was subjected to arson twice in March 1840. Tandle Hill had been a favourite site for meetings of United Englishmen, reformers in 1801 and 1809, and striking powerloom weavers in 1826.³⁶ The connection, of course, might be co-incidental, but Carl Griffin and Nicholas Blomley suggest that ostensibly isolated attacks on enclosure hedges and private plantations were symptomatic of wider recognition that inhabitants' freedom of movement as well as their use of common land was being restricted by capital investment and dramatic changes in the landscape.³⁷

Paternalist manufacturers took up the issue of shrinking access to open space and provided the impetus for a House of Commons select committee on 'public walks' in 1833. In part attempting to forestall the radicals in the footpath preservation societies, and in part out of a genuine concern about the health and morals of the working classes, employers expressed their anxiety to the committee about the consequences of industrialization and urbanization. Open spaces were seen as necessary outlets for working-class energy rather than the pub or cellar slums of the towns. The report indicated something of the culture of walking among all classes in society. Richard Walker MP, of Bury, lamented 'I only know that on a fine Sunday evening the turnpike roads out of the town are crowded with people, and I know that they would much rather walk in the fields if they could'.³⁸ Yet the element of elite control persisted; open spaces had to be regulated in the form of parks and walks. Edwin Chadwick argued that the need for parks was amplified by threats to social order, as evidenced when, on the occasion of a holiday given to celebrate Queen Victoria's marriage in 1840, the Chartists arranged a mass meeting in Manchester. The magistrates persuaded the mayor to open the zoo, botanic gardens and museum 'to the classes who had never before entered them' at the

same hour as the meeting, to dissuade attendance.³⁹ The opening of public parks in Manchester, Sheffield, and elsewhere in the 1840s did not quench the thirst of radicals and trade unions for open space. The form and purpose of parks was determined by middle-class paternalism, and distracted the working classes from the wider issue of an unrestrained and un-directed 'right to roam'. This tension over the 'public' nature of space perhaps suggests one reason why the agrarian ideals of the Chartist Land Plan gained popularity, and abundant membership, in the region.⁴⁰

The physical execution of these changes altered the ways in which inhabitants moved; how the new developments were recorded shaped the ways in which such spaces were perceived. The rage for statistical enquiry and definable boundaries was formulated by a combination of new, ostensibly objective, and centrally overseen methods of mapping, culminating in the Ordnance Survey maps from 1848. Protesters' tactics reflected knowledge of these rationalized representations of roads, and the different meanings of walking that they entailed. The old parish field system had associated walking with labour and was defined by local communal knowledge; the new roads emphasized connections between towns, crossing boundaries rather than confining the walkers to 'their place'.⁴¹ From 1815, protesters concentrated their energies on parading and occupying particular routes, especially the main roads in and out of towns. Under Chartism, the routes of these processions came to be closely stewarded and planned in detail. Yet older knowledge of parish roads and footpaths remained, as most clearly evidenced during times of attack by the authorities, when protesters would escape or elude arrest by reverting to older roads and crossing fields along footpaths. These tactics were demonstrated most dramatically before the Skircoat Moor meeting on 15 August

1842. A large procession from the surrounding villages attempted to enter Halifax along the New Bank road but was halted by a line of special constables and soldiers on the North Bridge. Benjamin Wilson recalled: ‘seeing the impossibility of forcing our way through them, we made our way over the walls and through the fields, which were not built upon at that time’.⁴²

II

Moors and fields were symbolic. Their appearance reminded inhabitants of previous conflicts, and thereby formed visual signs which contributed to political rhetoric and identities. Chartists were perhaps the best versed in the language of moors and fields and their histories. In October 1838, the ‘Great West Riding demonstration’ was held on Hartshead Moor. In an advert in the *Northern Star*, Bronterre O’Brien encouraged those attending the demonstration to beat the attendance of the monster meeting on Kersal Moor that had occurred the previous month:

The noble example of Kersal Moor is before you – the eyes of the country are upon you... Will you be behind the men of Lancashire? Shall Peep Green yield the palm to Kersal Moor? Forbid it, honour!... You must out-Kersal Kersal Moor, as Kersal Moor has out-Peterloed Peterloo.⁴³

The call in the *Northern Star* for the next mass meeting on Kersal Moor in May 1839 playfully exploited this regional rivalry: ‘Go all of you, and beat the men of Yorkshire:

and they will thank you for it. Let the cry be – To the Moor! To the Moor!! To the Moor!!!’⁴⁴ The rhetoric of O’Brien and the *Northern Star* was common in political propaganda throughout this period. Speeches and writings transmitted the history of the places and their association with political activity to attenders at protests, political activists elsewhere, and to later generations protesting on the same sites. Places such as Kersal Moor and St Peter’s Fields became symbols. Their names could become what sociologists have identified in linguistic terms as metonyms or synecdoches, that is, short-hand epithets concentrating a range of associations or narratives. These associations were simplified enough to be recognizable by the majority of inhabitants, yet broad enough to be interpreted by different groups in relation to their own experiences and identities.⁴⁵ Appealing to local pride was an obvious tactic of orators but it did help to cement the metonyms in popular usage and thereby in collective memory. Narratives and memory play a large part in the formation of identities. Maurice Halbwachs argued that a ‘society has first of all to find its landmarks’, which, as Paul Pickering and Alexander Tyrell have illustrated in their study of political monuments, could be spatial as well as temporal.⁴⁶ By employing recurrent narratives of place, massaging local pride by associating places with stories of heroism or tragedy, political orators were able to shape inhabitants’ perceptions of those places and inspire further action. Other historians of memory have indicated how later users of such narratives and symbols did not need to have been present at the original events. Indeed, collective memory was formed and renewed by groups isolated from the immediate context of the symbols they were manipulating for their own purposes. Memory was less important as a conservator of a

single linear history than as ‘a generator of meaning’ to be used in new contexts and movements.⁴⁷

Peterloo became a synecdoche for local and national government repression, which was constantly evoked and reiterated in collective memory by parades and demonstrations on the site, especially on the anniversary of the event and on Henry Hunt’s birthday.⁴⁸ During the agitation for the reform bill in October 1831, a procession of reformists made great play of crossing St Peter’s Fields on its way to a meeting on nearby Camp Field. Camp Field itself also garnered political associations. Local radical leader Joshua Shuttleworth underlined its radical history in his speech, informing the crowd that they were ‘assembled on the very ground which about thirty-six years ago the first public meeting was held in this town for reform and peace’. He thereby suggested a continuity of his contemporary reform movement with earlier radicalism and legitimized its heritage. He appealed further to his own legitimacy as a leader in stating that the radical meeting of 1795 was called and attended by his father and the fathers of some of the other members of the Manchester Political Union. He then employed the common narrative device of alluding to tragedy by reminding the audience that ‘the meeting was riotously dispersed by a ‘Church and King’ mob’, before appealing to an optimistic belief in the march of progress: ‘I rejoice that it should happen that on the particular spot where the first reformers of Manchester were [...] tumultuously defeated, reformers have again congregated in amazing numbers’.⁴⁹

The symbolism of the landscape, interpreted in collective memory, contributed to the political discourse at the events. The banners, flags, bands of music, and fiery orations from the hustings furthermore transformed mass meetings into spectacles. The moorland

environment contributed to this ritualistic experience. Public meetings openly exploited the views from the hills as a means of gaining support or to intimidate opponents. On 1 July 1833, campaigners for a ten-hour working day held a mass meeting on Wibsey Low Moor, south of Bradford. The *Halifax Guardian* commented on the spectacular view the crowds could see from their destination: ‘The elevation of the ground which affords an almost boundless prospect from the Craven Hills on one side, to the Peak of Derbyshire on the other’. Crucially, it reported how this topography ‘allowed each approaching group to exhibit their full line of march as they advanced to the site’.⁵⁰ The processions were thus transposed into a scene resembling a military battle, but this was a battle of visual propaganda rather than physical conflict with the authorities. Participants in processions up moors were in effect ‘writing’ on the landscape for the attention of their opponents or observers in the town below. The length of the lines was equated to the depth of support for the ten hours’ campaign, physically displayed on the landscape. The protesters were endowed with a sense of power and achievement on their ascent of the moor and its extensive regional views. By climbing the peaks, protesters gained control over the environment over their authorities in a symbolic as well as physical way.⁵¹

These contests occurred when the old world of magistrates’ spies, attempting to penetrate the darkness of the radical underworld, was shifting to government by rational liberalism, as Patrick Joyce sees it, based on ruling through deliberately overt forms of surveillance. This was encapsulated in the watch and ward parading urban streets and boundaries, then most fully in the police.⁵² Mass meetings on hills involved the subversion or manipulation of perception in response to these new methods. On 27 August 1842, strikers from Ashton-under-Lyne met on Hartshead Pike (a prominent hill

with a beacon overlooking the town) to plan an attack on the mills in Oldham. The magistrates and manufacturers stationed scouts on Oldham parish church tower ‘to give alarm in case any mob approached the town’. The Oldham diarist Edwin Butterworth also noted that ‘by means of a glass a number of persons were seen to be holding a meeting on Brown Edge, a hill near Mossley’.⁵³ Height had the effect of amplifying the apparent scale of the crowds. Both authorities and newspapers constantly debated the difficulties of estimating the attendance at demonstrations, and such reports are never reliable. Organizers of protests were well aware of this, and used hills to their advantage. Hence the *Leeds Mercury* estimated an attendance of 8000 at a reform meeting on Almondbury Bank (south of Huddersfield) on 2 August 1819, ‘though from the hilly nature of the ground they might appear more numerous’.⁵⁴

Chartists were the most skilful exploiters of the landscape, consciously designing protests to be ‘read’ by their opponents. The torchlight processions to meetings in late 1838 exemplified this tactic. The *Northern Star* described one such meeting in Bolton in November 1838. The main procession around the townships of Great and Little Bolton created a striking spectacle:

In going down the hill to Little Bolton, the sight was truly grand – the whole town appeared to be in a blaize [sic]... After having paraded the town, the procession arrived at the market place, when a scene truly sublime, beautiful, novel, and picturesque presented itself. Several rings were made by parties of torch bearers, which from a distance had the appearance of immense circular fires.⁵⁵

The three main principles of landscape perception -- ‘sublime’, ‘beautiful’, and ‘picturesque’ -- though again the mark of an over eager reporter, were nevertheless indicative of how such terminology had filtered into popular usage.⁵⁶ The industrialising southern Pennines were predominantly a landscape of the sublime. Popularized by romanticism, the sublime became the dominant aesthetic of early Victorian architecture, including the overpowering scale of the new factories and warehouses in industrial towns.⁵⁷ The landscape of the torchlight meetings reflected this sense of the wild, the dark juxtaposed with flame, and the ominous consequences of obscurity and anonymity. Malcolm Chase has commented on the sense of threat created by the flames of the torchlight processions, lighting up the famished faces of the participants and echoing the arson of the Swing riots in 1830, a fear though now potentially transposed from the southern arable flatlands to the northern moorland environment. Viewed close-up, the processions must have conveyed these associations to the authorities. Viewed from a distance, by contrast, the torchlight processions created a more subliminal scene. Lines of light highlighted the contours of the moors, visually displayed the extent of support, and ensured that the protesters were simultaneously anonymous yet visible to an almost hyper-real extent. This tactic was of course highly controversial, and exacerbated splits between ‘moral’ and ‘physical force’ Chartists in the localities. In December 1838, a royal proclamation prohibited all open-air nocturnal meetings.⁵⁸ The Chartist leadership accordingly denounced the tactic, though Bury and Wakefield held torchlight meetings in defiance.⁵⁹ Later mass meetings nevertheless maintained this sense that authority could be gained using the landscape merely as a result of the vast numbers attending. The *Northern Star*, for example, commented on the Kersal Moor demonstration of 25 May

1839: ‘the entire landscape, as seen from the hustings, was transformed into an agitated sea of human life, which to the eye of a Democrat, must have presented a spectacle closely bordering on the sublime’.⁶⁰

The form of the landscape itself also contributed to the sense of spectacle and the extraordinary experienced by the participants. The Basin Stone on Walsden Moor overlooking Todmorden was the site of a meeting of Chartists on 18 August 1842 during the ‘plug’ strikes. A.W. Bayes, a local artist probably present at the event, later immortalized the event in a painting, in which a respectable grouping of men and women huddled round the lumpy outcrop of millstone grit, listening to exhortations by the speaker, Robert Brook, perched upon the natural podium.⁶¹ The location would not have been so iconic for either the Chartists or the painter had it not been for the unusual topography of the site, and also because of its other uses. The Hudsonites, a radical religious sect, held meetings at the Basin Stone from 1840 to 1848. They associated the sense of bleak wilderness of the moor and its stones with free speech and radical thinking.⁶² Respectable though the Chartist meeting was, it could not have escaped echoes of these other connotations.

Blackstone Edge, overlooking Rochdale and forming the natural boundary between Lancashire and Yorkshire, was even more striking in its appearance. Bleak and barren, its very form had long been symbolized in folklore and travel literature as the very edge of civilization. The site was used for annual Whitsun camp meetings by Chartists and was most dramatically employed to commemorate the French Revolution in June 1848. The Chartists did not meet on the edge itself, but used it as a background when they were assembled by the White House, itself a prominent landmark off the main

road leading ‘over the top’. The views from this site were panoramic and cross-Pennine, enhancing the crowd’s feeling of authority over the region: ‘they were seen like a dark line moving slowly along the valley, and then mounting the bye-paths and the winding highway’.⁶³ The area was isolated and the steep climb made it hard to reach by cavalry troops, yet it was simultaneously accessible by Pennine inhabitants, many of whom would have used the route to transport their goods between Halifax and Rochdale markets. Military and civil authorities certainly viewed Blackstone Edge with some trepidation: General Sir Charles Napier, commander of the Northern district, drew a sketch map of military positions in 1840 which inflated the size of the topographical feature to a highly exaggerated extent.⁶⁴ With attenders from as far as Manchester and Bradford forced to meet on such no-man’s land, Chartists were frustrated against the increasing restrictions on their freedom of meeting. George Archdeacon was reported to have said in his speech:

We commented at great length on the police and said dare the police come here to stop our meeting. We are not now in the narrow streets where they can call upon Special Constables. We are on a broad field of free discussion – and such are the places where we ought to meet.⁶⁵

By comparing moorland and town with freedom and enclosure, his speech confirmed the centrality of space to political discourse and radical thinking about liberty.

Although extraordinary spectacles, mass meetings on moors and fields were not alien experiences for their participants. On the contrary, they were familiar and accessible, qualities which ensured their success. The environment was essential to this familiarity. Social movements and protests were only the most visual and unusual components of a whole repertoire of resistance, enacted daily. As Michel de Certeau suggested, small actions, such as occupying spaces at unexpected times, could be methods of resistance against authorities or those who had originally created the spaces.⁶⁶ Open-air meetings attracted tens of thousands of protesters because they deliberately reflected three familiar features of everyday life in the ‘neighbourhood’: religious camp meetings, ‘bearing home’, and rambling. The working and social habits of inhabitants gave them a connection to the landscape, and this in turn shaped the nature of their protest.

Chartists held a camp meeting on Skircoat Moor during the ‘plug’ strikes of August 1842. The *Halifax Guardian* reported:

After the more immediate business of the meeting was finished, the greater part of the immense multitude still remained encamped on the moor. A great number of them stretched themselves on the heather, in large circular groups, having a great many women amongst them, and several of these groups were singing Chartist hymns and songs.⁶⁷

This almost bucolic description of the crowd lying amongst the heather suggested at least what appeared to be their comfortable familiarity with the landscape. The meeting also highlighted the significance of cross-Pennine connections. Contingents from Lancashire

had spent the previous night camped out on the moor. It was clearly much more than a political meeting. This atmosphere reflected why such meetings were able to attract mass support. The speeches, upon which historians often place much emphasis, were for many attenders not the major draw of mass meetings. It was well acknowledged that not all would be able to hear the speeches from the hustings, or were in tune with the aims of the leaders to strike until the Charter was made 'the law of the land'. Indeed, Paul Pickering has indicated the importance of visual symbols at such events because Chartist marshals admitted to the newspapers that 'many had not the opportunity of hearing' at the Kersal Moor and Peep Green mass meetings.⁶⁸ The Chartist camp meeting at Blackstone Edge in June 1848 was accompanied by a festival-like atmosphere; the *Northern Star* commented: 'the people distributed themselves over the ground and began to eat their dinners, thereby presenting the aspect of a huge picnic party rather than of a meeting having a political object'.⁶⁹ The experience and the environment were more likely vehicles for a more diffuse or less formulated political expression of the ordinary attenders, in contrast to the radical leaders or activists who had their own agenda.

The meetings had the air of a fair, a ramble, and a Methodist camp meeting combined. The New Connexion and Primitive offshoots of Methodism flourished in the Pennine regions, and their initial religious radicalism attracted the politically radical. Radical 'hymns' were sung at mass platform meetings in the 1810s.⁷⁰ Though the links between itinerant evangelicalism and radicalism had weakened by the time of the Chartists, the culture remained. Chartists exploited this in their 'camp meetings'. Indeed, many shared the same venues and rituals of festival.⁷¹ The diaries of Edwin Butterworth

show that Oldham Edge and Greenacres Moor were favoured spots for camp meetings of Primitive and New Connexion Methodists as well as trade unionists and Chartists.⁷²

Mass meetings were festivals as well as political events, especially as many – out of necessity and to gain the largest possible attendance – occurred on the public holidays of Good Friday, Whit Monday, and New Year, when inhabitants would normally go rambling or for picnics in the open air.⁷³ As Robert Poole argues, the nature and scale of the processions to St Peter's Fields on 16 August 1819 owed much to the event taking place during wakes and rushbearing holidays.⁷⁴ Mass meetings throughout this period reflected this culture of working-class festival, and established features of their yearly cycles of ritual and custom. The processions to moors mirrored the long history of friendly society parades in northern manufacturing towns. Consciously or unconsciously, they also subverted the Whit festival processions originally initiated by Tory Anglican clergy in Manchester in 1801 to gain symbolic control over the streets against the rapidly expanding nonconformist Sunday Schools.⁷⁵ Inhabitants' familiarity with moors was fostered by other aspects of everyday life, including rambling and foot races. During the wakes holidays, foot races were held on Greenacres Moor near Oldham, a popular site for protest. The Middleton radical, Samuel Bamford, recalled nostalgically in his memoirs how he spent his leisure time rambling around Strangeways and Broughton, that is, the very areas surrounding Kersal Moor, and even as far as the 'wood-crowned Tandles', another site for mass meetings in Royton.⁷⁶ Skircoat and Kersal moors were the venues for horse races; the latter were held from 1730 to 1846. Indeed, the unprecedented attendance (allegedly up to 300,000) at a Chartist rally at Kersal on 24 September 1838 can be attributed to the organizers cannily holding it on the same day as the Manchester

races later that afternoon.⁷⁷ The liminality of the moors nevertheless sharpened the edge of this familiarity; even such an accessible site as Skircoat had its covert corners where deviance could occur. The diarist Anne Lister of Shibden Hall fantasized about an illicit homosexual encounter in a shed on Skircoat Moor; the White House on Blackstone Edge until recently retained a reputation as the site of adulterous rendezvous; and forbidden popular recreations continued on Hartshead Moor and Fairweather Green near Bradford during Whitsun and Bradford fairs.⁷⁸

Moorland meetings produced what Foucault termed heterotopias, that is, ephemeral spaces that are carnivalesque, out of the ordinary, and obeying their own rules.⁷⁹ The association of places such as Kersal Moor and Peep Green with Whit festivals, touring circuses, races, or fairgrounds, gave the political meetings and camp meetings there a similar atmosphere. Politics could occur outside its normal confines of public buildings and the increasingly exclusive 'public' sphere.⁸⁰ Camp meetings, both political and religious, fed into prevalent conflicts over space between the established State and dissent. Institutional religion was based in urban centres and distrusted the moorland meeting houses, itinerant preachers, and cottage meetings of the wilder sects of evangelical nonconformity. Built and urban space was controllable; open space by contrast was seen by local authorities as wild, unpredictable, dangerous. By replicating the culture of semi-rural Pennine life in the neighbourhood, such meetings on moors briefly allowed inhabitants a chance to express their views in a space over which they could feel some ownership or which, at least, reflected an ideal of everyday life. Furthermore, this opportunity could be open to all who may not have had the desire to do so orally or in text.

Such feelings of escape were especially pertinent because the landscape was changing rapidly. Processions reflected the wider popular response to changing representations of space in this period. As William Sewell has theorized, protesters were normally ‘resource-poor’, and only had access to certain forms of ‘spatial agency’. They generally had to accept the physical environment, built by landowners and authorities, as a given.⁸¹ Owners and occupiers of land and buildings used space and place to demonstrate their authority and wealth visually. The genteel Palladian villas of the suburbs and the landscaping of country estates reflected their desire for show and for privacy. Although the residential structures of expanding manufacturing towns were not as extreme as Engels envisaged Manchester to be, nevertheless heightened the level of contention when protests occurred in areas separated from working-class habitation by a middle-class drift from the town. In Halifax, with the prevailing south-west wind, factory smoke did not reach Skircoat, and it became an area of fashionable suburbia. John Crabtree’s history of Halifax, published in 1836, described Skircoat Moor as ‘the lungs of Halifax’ and portrayed the site as a place of peace, quiet and beauty: ‘Here the valetudinarian may enjoy his morning’s walk and inhale the pure breezes that are wafted over its surface, uncontaminated by the smoke of steam engines’.⁸² The processions, with their bands and songs, and the mass meetings, with their crowds and hustings, would therefore have transgressed this enforced quiet of nature, cocooned by respectable villas. With the working classes intruding on middle-class areas, the *sturm und drang* of the events furthermore disrupted the character and purpose of the suburbs. R. Wilkinson, a Chartist, evinced awareness of these distinctions in his speech at the Skircoat Moor meeting of July 1839. The *Northern Star* reported: ‘when he looked around him, and saw

the hills and valleys teeming with fertility, and contrasted the plenty bestowed upon their native country by nature, with the wretched state of want and misery inflicted upon the poorer classes of its inhabitants'.⁸³ The demonstrations therefore briefly illuminated the class divisions as evidenced in the environment, which, when associated with the political rhetoric of the speakers, may have resonated with the attenders as they processed back home to the slums, and perhaps stayed with them as they went past the area again in the course of their everyday lives. The spectacle and the everyday were thus combined mutually to reinforce each other, thereby making the experience of the everyday a powerful reminder of their cause.⁸⁴

The landscape of moors and fields used for protests was far from being a blank canvas for political activity. The landscape formed part of the symbolism and discourse of such events, not just in the heat of agitations, but also as part of the culture of everyday life. The experiences of daily life, from rambles, religion, work, mobility, and simple views to reactions to changes in those landscapes, principally enclosure, shaped the actions of protesters on those sites, while in the everyday life of inhabitants, viewing the landscape or hearing the names of contested sites formed a reminder of their political histories, infused into collective memory. Historians have sought continuities or conversely fissures within the myriad social and political movements that emerged during this period. Landscape could form solid connections between them all, however fractious or differing their aims may have been.

By 1848, the mass meeting was waning as the major tactic of popular movements. Moral force Chartists and local communities who had to shoulder the cost of policing distrusted the tactic. The *Halifax Reformer*, reporting on the Good Friday meeting on

Skircoat Moor in 1848, commented that feelings were running against monster meetings, since they were increasingly exciting fear rather than engendering confidence and support.⁸⁵ Protests in the industrial North had shifted from the early days of food rioting and tentative trades' combinations to the complex committees running general strikes and labour movements of post-Chartist Britain. By this time, the great mills of Manchester, Leeds, and their 'satellite' towns overshadowed the patches of scrubland and vestiges of commons that remained within them or on their edges. Social and political movements employed other methods of protest and organization that fit into this altered environment. Nevertheless, these changes did not mean that mass meetings on open spaces were no longer held; on the contrary, photographs of reform and labour meetings in the later Victorian period give a similar impression of the crowd contesting physical and symbolic space that peace and reform campaigners had felt in the 1800s.⁸⁶ What remained were social and political memories about such places, to be revived intermittently in times of crisis and political action.⁸⁷