

The defeat of the Second Reform Bill in October 1831 – An overview of public responses

Summary

The following series of three articles examine initial public responses to the news of the defeat of the Second Reform Bill in the House of Lords on 8th October 1831 across England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. The evidential basis for this article is a dataset of over 480 reform related public events gathered from a survey of over 150 national and regional newspapers and Home Office documents during the period of October-December 1831. The dataset includes peaceful gatherings, meetings, parades and demonstrations as well as violent incidences of disturbance and riot.

Part 1 - *The overall survey* explains the methodology of the data gathering and provides an assessment of the observations along with maps and animations displaying the data over space and time.

Part 2 - *In the metropolis...* considers initial public reactions to news of the defeat of the reform bill in London by studying public meetings, protests and disturbances over the five days after the announcement.

Part 3 - *Black flags and dumb peals* looks at the spread of the news of the defeat and the consequent public reactions across Britain and Ireland.

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Part 1 - The overall survey

Introduction

The 'reform riots' of autumn of 1831, as they are commonly known, are principally remembered through the major incidents of violent unrest that occurred in three cities. In the immediate aftermath of the failure of the Second Reform Bill to pass through the House of Lords in early October there was serious rioting in Derby and Nottingham, and then at the end of the month in Bristol. These three events alone, led to the deaths of scores of people, mostly at the hands of the military, huge amounts of property damage mainly through arson and a slew of capital charges, from which seven people were hanged and 43 transported.¹ One historian, in an effort to convey the historical importance of

¹ Poole, Steve. "'Some Examples Should Be Made': Prosecuting Reform Bill Rioters in 1831–32." In *Political Trials in an Age of Revolutions*, pp. 237-263 (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019) p. 237.

the Bristol 'reform riot' to a public audience, stated that it was "the bloodiest battle on mainland Britain since Culloden".²

Despite the importance of these particular moments within the 'reform crisis' of the early 1830s, many other smaller riots and disturbances occurred in the autumn of 1831 and they were in turn embedded within a wave of reactive public meetings and protests that swept the country in the wake of the failure of the Second Reform Bill. Previous research has generally resorted to listing the major and some of the more minor riot events, whilst concentrating any analysis on the former and typically in isolation.³ However, it is not only the content of the major events that is of interest to us, but their contextual, spatial and temporal relationships to other incidents of reform protest whether pacific or violent. This brings us neatly on to one of the aims of this project which is to analyse the *spread* of collective violence related to reform and to consider the related question of why some areas experienced riots whilst others did not. Recently historians have begun to reflect on whether the existence of extra-parliamentary campaigning organisations such as Political Unions which first appear in the period, had a role in limiting the spread of rioting.⁴ Other than this useful research there has been little work looking at the processes of diffusion of disturbances during the reform crisis.

In order to carry out an analysis effectively, a comprehensive dataset of both violent and non-violent reform-related protest events is required, preferably for both Britain and Ireland. There are already in existence two datasets that cover protests in the period of October to December 1831. The first is the Horn/Tilly survey *Contentious Gatherings in Britain, 1758-1834* which contains within it a study of Britain from 1828 to 1834.⁵ This investigation was carried out by researchers between 1975 and 1984 using a limited selection of newspapers and periodicals (4) along with records of parliamentary debates. Although comprehensive in its scope, the sources were limited, and it cannot compete with the search capabilities, wealth and diversity of online newspaper sources available today. The second dataset comes from a more recent, long durée (1800-1939) study of disorders in three major British cities, Liverpool, Glasgow, and Manchester based primarily upon local newspaper sources.⁶ The limitation in the number and diversity of sources in the former is matched to a degree in the obvious geographical constraints of the latter.

Consequently, we conducted our own comprehensive survey of protest events in the autumn of 1831 for both Britain and Ireland. This allowed us to decide what data we wanted to collect from the newspaper sources to characterise the events and to determine our own categories for reform-related violent and non-violent events. Utilising online sources, particularly newspapers, was also necessary as we were working under the pandemic restrictions when the research was carried out (2020-21). The aim of the overall survey was to both capture and document all the reform-related riots and disturbances and contextualise them within a social movement that reacted to the news of the defeat

² Hunt, Tristram. "I predict a riot." *The Guardian*. (2006, August 21). Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/aug/21/britishidentity>.

³ Rudé, George. "English Rural and Urban Disturbances on the Eve of the First Reform Bill, 1830-1831." *Past & Present*, (37), pp. 87-102. (OUP, 1967); Stevenson, John. *Popular Disturbances in England, 1700-1870* (London, Routledge 1979), 218-28; Griffin, Carl. "The culture of combination: Solidarities and collective action before Tolpuddle." *The Historical Journal*, 58(2), pp. 443-480. (CUP, 2015).

⁴ Lopatin, Nancy D. *Political Unions, Popular Politics and the Great Reform Act of 1832* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1999).

⁵ For the years 1758-1827 the survey was only based on London and its environs. Horn, Nancy, and Tilly, Charles. *Contentious Gatherings in Britain, 1758-1834*. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2009-08-14. <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR08872.v2>.

⁶ Tiratelli, Matteo. "The changing practice of rioting: revisiting repertoire transitions in Britain, 1800-1939." *Mobilization* 25, no. 2 (2020): 201-219.

of the Second Reform Bill. This involved, in addition, gathering details of all the non-violent reform-related protests that occurred in the form of public meetings, parades and demonstrations. The data collected enabled us to make an overall assessment of the numbers of violent and non-violent protests, where and when they occurred and to compare regions and nations. On a more detailed level the data allowed us to make reasoned judgements about the severity of a violent incident and it also let us gauge whether an incident of collective violence was a ‘stand-alone’ event, had developed out of a peaceful reform protest or had been merely peripheral to a peaceful event. Finally, it provided us with spatial and temporal data to assess the relationship between events and the spread of disorders.

In the following section the methodology of the data gathering process is explained and then we move onto to examining the results of the overall survey and making some observations.

Methodology

Sources

In order to gauge public reactions to the defeat of the Second Reform Bill a survey of daily reform related protest events was undertaken for England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland over the period 1 October to 31- December 1831.⁷ This was achieved by studying primary and secondary sources in three phases. First, a selection of contemporary national newspapers was made, with an eye to political bias. Five papers that were accessible online were chosen, representing Whig, Tory and more radical perspectives, and then read in detail day by day for the three-month period. These are shown in Table 1 below:

Title	Frequency (days)	Publication days	Location of publisher	Political allegiance
<i>The Times</i>	Daily (6)	Mon-Sat	London	Tory/Whig
<i>Manchester Guardian</i>	Weekly (1)	Sat	Manchester	Whig
<i>Observer</i>	Two days (2)	Sun-Mon	London	Whig
<i>Morning Post</i>	Daily (6)	Mon-Sat	London	Tory
<i>Examiner</i>	Weekly (1)	Sun	London	Radical reformist

Table 1: National newspapers employed in phase 1 of the overall survey

In the second phase, 149 regional newspapers were collectively searched for terms relating to “reform” and “county” and “meetings”. In order to capture reform related events in Scotland and Ireland two newspapers the *Dublin Evening Mail* and *The Scotsman* were searched in detail. A survey of Welsh newspapers demonstrated that geographic coverage was thin and of the few available online the *Monmouthshire Merlin* was the only one with significant reporting of reform related protest.

⁷ This timespan was selected initially for scoping purposes and then after a significant amount of data was collected confirmed as the period of study.

In the third phase correspondence from magistrates, officers and other county authorities to the Home Secretary concerning the maintenance of public order in 1831 was surveyed along with datasets giving locations where political unions had formed in the period.⁸

Definitions and categorisations

The kinds of events that were deemed relevant to the survey had to have a direct relationship to Parliamentary reform and involve public protest whether peaceful or violent. Typical examples were:

- County, ward, parish or vestry reform meetings
- Mass meetings of Political Unions, Trades Unions or other campaigning organisations
- Spontaneous or planned gatherings, parades, marches or demonstrations
- Riots or disturbances

Smaller, non-public planning meetings at the civic level or closed meetings of councils of organisations were not included in the survey. Also, events that could not be defined by a specific date were excluded.

Where possible for each reform related event the following information was collected:

- **Event No.** [unique ID based on chronological sorting]
- **Geographic characteristics:** District/Location; City/Town; County (current); County (historic) Country; Latitude/Longitude
- **Primary or Secondary Source Reference**
- **Event Type** [Protest, Disturbance, Riot]
- **Event sub-type** [Outside/Inside (O/I), Meeting (M), Gathering (G), Parade (P), Targeted attacks (T), Looting (L), Violence (V), Effigy burning (E)]
- **DE no.** [Daily event number, notes when events were contiguous over more than one day]
- **Temporal characteristics:** Start (day); Month; Date: Begin; Time: Begin; Date: End; Time: End; Duration (hrs)
- **Characteristics of the crowd:** Estimated crowd size; Crowd composition and description; Age; Gender; Ethnicity
- **Targets of the crowd:** Buildings damaged; Arson - Buildings; People injured/killed by crowd
- **Use of weapons by crowd:** Missiles (M), Clubs (C), Bladed (B), Firearms (F), Firebombs (FB)
- **Characteristics of authorities:** Type: Special Constables (S), Police (P), Yeomanry (Y), Regular Troops (T), Regular Cavalry (C); Numbers; Use of weapons; Crowd Arrests; Crowd Killed/Wounded; Authorities Killed/wounded
- **Political Union:** Date of formation; Length of existence based on October 1831 (months)⁹
- **Notes:** Brief details of the nature and narrative of the event including descriptions of banners, placards and slogans shouted by the crowd.

Each daily reform related event was placed in a category defined below:

- **Protest (P):** Non-violent (property or people) public event
- **Disturbance (D):** Minor violent event, with minor damage, without military or Yeomanry intervention or significant casualties

⁸ The Home Office data was from TNA Home Office: Counties Correspondence 1820-1850 Ref. HO 52/12-16 (1831) and the datasets on locations of Political Unions are given in Lopatin, *Political Unions* p. 182 n.57 and pp. 174-177.

⁹ The date of formation and length of existence of a Political Union was determined from Lopatin, *Political Unions* Appendix pp. 174-177.

- **Riot (R):** Major violent event with significant damage to property or loss of life, mass participation, significant duration and intervention of yeomanry or military

These daily reform related events were then broken down into a series of sub-categories providing more detail on the content of events:

- Inside/Outside (I/O): Self-explanatory
- Meeting (M): Formal planned event
- Gathering (G): Informal unplanned event
- Parade (P): Procession typically from rally point(s) to mass meeting
- Targeted attacks (T): Damage to properties and possessions of or associated with anti-reformers
- Looting (L): Acquisitive crime
- Violence (V): Physical confrontations between pro-reform crowds and authorities or anti-reformers
- Effigy (E): Burning of effigies of anti-reformers

These sub-category tags are combined together and précised by the overall category to allow analysis of the data for patterns of protest behaviours. For example, the string POPME represents a non-violent protest with a parade to an outside public meeting followed by an effigy burning. The order of events is covered by the orientation of sub-categories; so POMPE would be a non-violent protest in the form of an outdoor public meeting followed by a parade and the burning of effigies. Similarly, the string DOGT designates a disturbance derived from an outdoor informal gathering leading to targeted attack on the property or possessions of anti-reformers.

Results and observations

Summary

In all, 482 daily reform related events were identified from the primary and secondary sources for the period 1st October to 31st December 1831. These are broken down by country and category in Table 1. The first point of note is that the number of violent events (disturbances and riots) make up just over 13 percent or about one in seven (65/482) of the reform related events. This fraction is likely to be non-conservative in that violent events were more likely to be reported in the newspapers than non-violent local reform meetings. Peaceful meetings, parades and demonstrations were thus significantly more common than incidents of collective violence. However, it should be noted that amongst the latter there were a handful of very serious riots, particularly in Derby, Nottingham and Bristol.

Country	Protests (P)	Disturbances (D)	Riots (R)	Total	Population 1831 (millions)	Events per 100,000 population	Violent events per 100,000 population
England	295	36	26	357	13.0	2.75	0.477
Wales	4	1	0	5	0.9	0.56	0.111
Scotland	80	1	0	81	2.4	3.38	0.042
Ireland	38	0	1	39	7.8	0.50	0.013
Total	417	38	27	482	24.1	2.00	0.270

Table 2: Distribution of daily reform related protest event types by country and population

The number of reform related events per 100,000 population¹⁰ shows that they were more prevalent in Scotland (3.38) and England (2.75) than in the two other countries. This could be partly related to the geographic distribution of newspapers and their coverage in the period and/or their current availability. Despite this caveat, the data suggests that, relative to population, reform protests were very common in Scotland followed by those in England. However, the distribution of collective violence events (riots plus disturbances) paints a significantly different picture. Reform related riots and disturbances were far more common in England per 100,000 population (0.477), more than ten times that of Scotland (0.042) and thirty times that of Ireland (0.013). The figures for Wales (0.111), where the sample of reform related events is very small may have been significantly distorted.

Temporal distribution

The distribution of the various categories of events over time is given in the histogram in Figure 1. The events occurring over the week before the vote in the House of Lords were mainly public meetings associated with petitioning the Lords to support the passing of the bill. Clearly the majority of protest events occurred over the two weeks after the vote on the 8th October. Typically, these were public meetings at the parish, town, city or county level called after news of the failure of the Bill had arrived. These meetings were, in general, to announce or to achieve agreement over written addresses to the King. These appeals were primarily concerned with opposing the potential royal dissolution of the government as a consequence of the defeat of the Bill in the House of Lords. They also included other demands, such as, for the King to appoint new peers and in some cases veiled threats such as the mass non-payment of tithes and taxes if the Reform Bill was not sanctioned (see Figure 1). There were also significant exceptions, not to this temporal pattern of public meetings, but to their content.

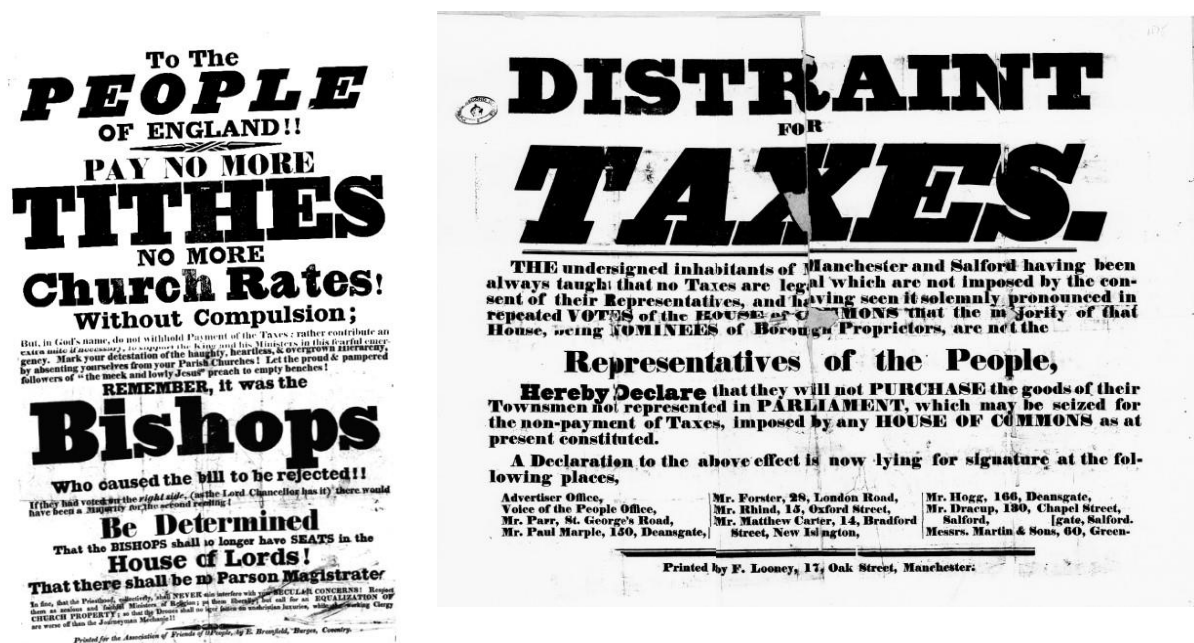


Figure 1: Pro-reform posters from Coventry and Manchester in the aftermath of the defeat of the Second Reform Bill in October 1831¹¹

¹⁰ Data from 1831 Census.

¹¹ TNA Home Office: Counties Correspondence 1820-1850 Ref. HO 52/15/2 f.442 and HO 52/13/8 f.475.

The Second Reform Bill with its property qualifications and limited extension of the franchise presented few, if any, concrete gains for the working classes other than the possibility of further reform at some future point. The limitations in the Bill and the understanding that its content was, perhaps, aimed more at securing Whig ascendancy in the House of Commons than ‘real’ reform of the political system was well understood by the more radical sections of the working class. Orators and organisers such as Henry Hunt, the MP for Preston, were deeply critical of the Bill proposing instead universal suffrage, annual general elections and the abolition of the property qualification as ‘real reform’. These ideas certainly had some traction amongst the working class, particularly in the deeply disenfranchised northern mill towns and through the efforts of radical organisations such as the recently formed National Union of the Working Classes in London. Consequently, public meetings and protests ostensibly *against* the Second Reform Bill but only because it was far from radical enough, *have* been included in this survey.

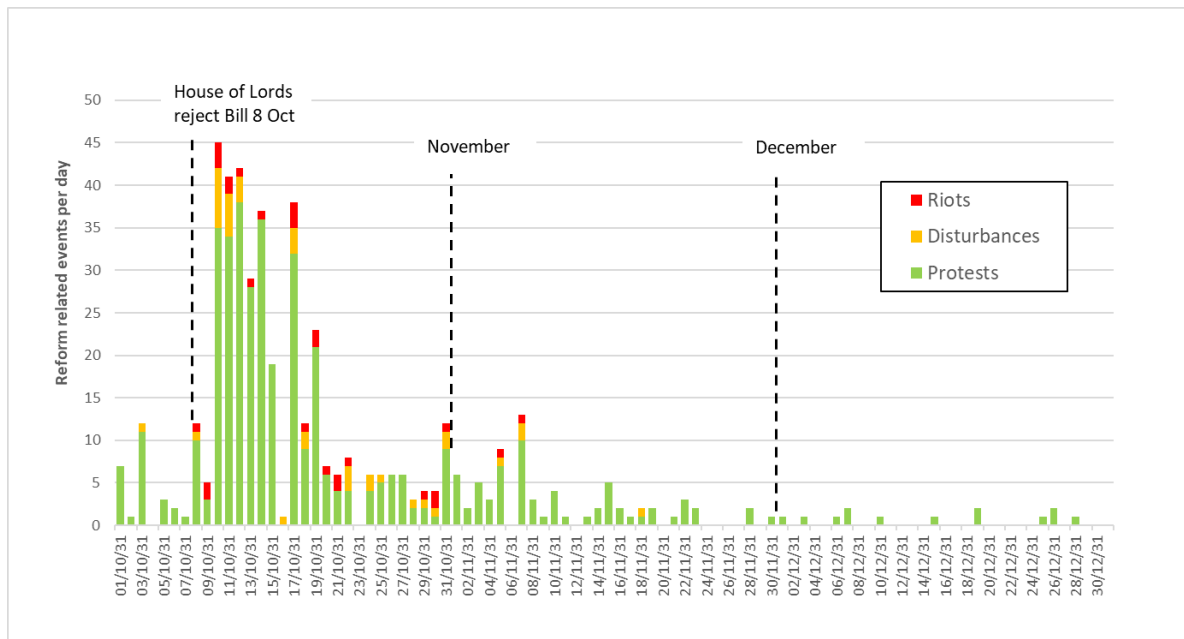


Figure 2: Distribution of reform related events over time (Oct-Dec 1831)

But what of anti-reform meetings and protests? The survey demonstrated that although there were some petitions against the Bill presented to Parliament,¹² anti-reform public meetings were very rare and, in any case, they have not been included in the data. In terms of collective violence, apart from the riot in Armagh and election related disturbances in Cambridge and Dorchester, where supporters from both sides clashed, ‘anti-reform crowds’ were also a novelty.¹³

Following a similar temporal pattern to the pro-reform public meetings in Figure 2 is the prevalence of disturbances and riots, some of which are associated with the arrival of information or as a result

¹² See, for example, *Morning Post* 5 October 1831 and *The Times* 5 October 1831.

¹³ For Armagh see *Guardian* 22 October 1831 and *Morning Post* 12 October 1831; for Cambridge see *Morning Post* 1 November 1831 and 4 November 1831; for Dorchester see *Morning Post* 20 October 1831 and *The Times* 19 October 1831.

of street protests that were organised in its wake. However, by mid-November this particular phase of reform agitation, both peaceful and violent, was receding and had clearly faded by December.

Spatial distribution

Figure 3 presents the geographic spread of reform related protest events across Britain and Ireland with the height of the marker representing the number of events in that location. The clustering of events in general corresponds to the major industrial centres such as London, the East and West Midlands, Manchester and the 'mill towns', the Northeast and the environs of the major Scottish cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow. The number of meetings in the Scottish Lowlands particularly in the larger counties of Lanark and Fife was considerable, as was the speed with which they were organised. This was premised upon the significant crowds that gathered in Scottish towns and cities sometimes over a few days awaiting the news of the fate of the Second Reform Bill. Outside of the riot in Armagh the pattern in Ireland corresponds to the holding of public meetings at a county level, which appears to have taken longer to organise than in its neighbours.

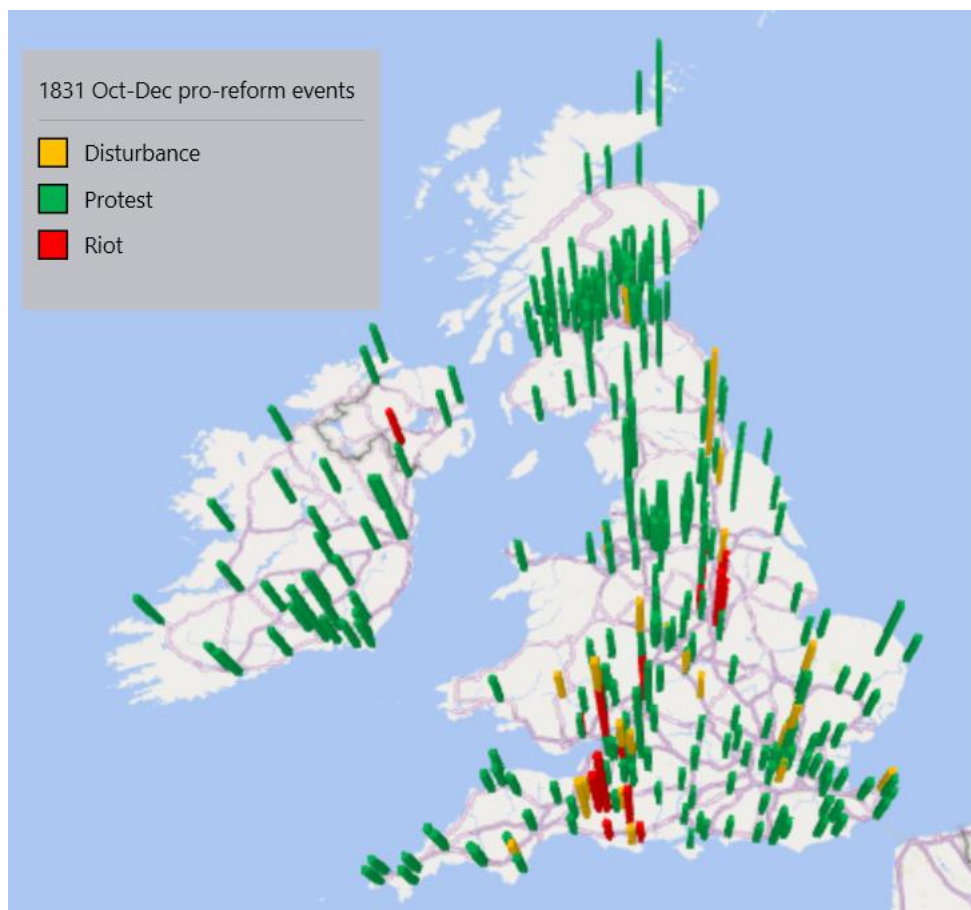


Figure 3: Geographic distribution of reform related protest events across Britain and Ireland (Oct-Dec 1831)

Riots

In terms of events involving serious collective violence there seem to be three connected temporal and spatial clusters shown in Figure 3 and 4. The first, Cluster A, situated primarily in the east Midlands, relates to the riots and disturbances in Derby, Nottingham and Loughborough over 8-11 October which were initiated by the arrival of news of the defeat of the Second Reform Bill. The second, Cluster B, appears in Dorset and south Somerset over the period 17-25 October and includes riots in

Dorchester, Blandford, , Poole, Sherborne and Yeovil. These were related to the high-profile by-election taking place in Dorset which in microcosm represented the battle between ‘old corruption’ and the new reformers. In a very close contest, the anti-reform candidate Lord Ashley controversially won the seat in Dorchester on 17th October, initiating the violence. The third, Cluster C is related to the most serious riot of the period, if not the Century. Over 29-31 October, Bristol experienced severe collective violence along with a bloody military intervention whilst there were associated riots and disturbances in nearby Bath and Newport in South Wales and latterly in Worcester.

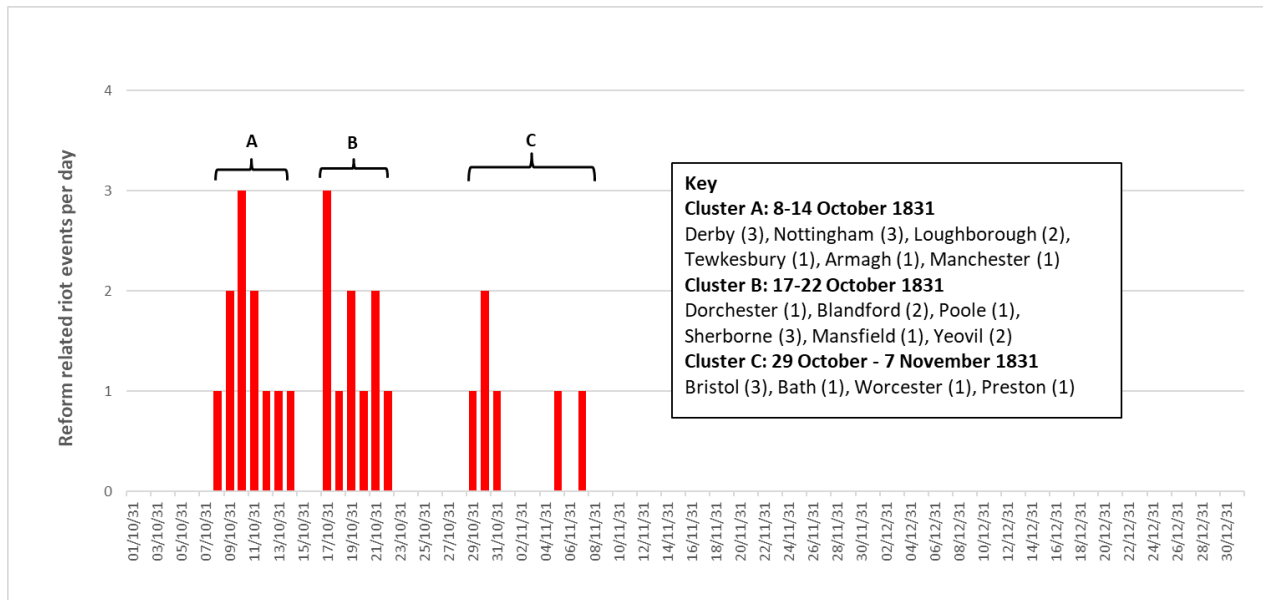


Figure 4: Temporal distribution of reform-related riot events from October-December 1831

Disturbances

Outside of the most serious incidents of public disorder, several behavioural patterns emerge when studying the 38 disturbances in the survey. Details of their principal content are given in Table 3.¹⁴ Clearly the majority of the disturbance events were related either to targeted attacks on anti-reform Lords and Bishops, damage to the property of anti-reformers or violence between crowds and special constables or police at reform related events. The first category includes the physical attacks on high-profile anti-reforming Lords and damage to their carriages or houses experienced during the semi-spontaneous and planned demonstrations in London of 10th and 12th October respectively. It also includes more disparate events ranging from the ‘rough music’ Lords Warwick, Selkirk, Wilton and two other anti-reforming Lords by a crowd of 1,500 on their arrival at Margate on the Dart steam-packet to the Archbishop of Canterbury being chased by a crowd from Croydon Town Hall and the Bishop of Bath and Wells being given similar treatment in Bristol. Attacks on their carriages as they travelled through England were also common with assaults by crowds on Lord Tankerville in Darlington, Lord Londonderry in Thirsk, Lord Bute in Banbury and the Bishop of Cork in Bath all occurring in the last two weeks of October.¹⁵

¹⁴ Note: the disturbance in London on 12th October 1831 included attacks on Lords in person and on their houses. In consequence this event has been counted twice, once as *In Person* and also as *Houses*.

¹⁵ Included within the assaults on Lords and Bishops in their carriages are two mistaken attacks. The first occurred in Bath on 11 October when the Roman Catholic Bishop of Cork passing through city on his way to Ireland was mistaken as the Church of England Bishop of Cork and Ross. The second attack occurred in Darlington on 30 October when the MP for Londonderry Sir Robert Ferguson was confused with Lord Londonderry, the

Disturbance involves	Anti-reform Lord(s) and/or Bishop(s) targeted			Breaking windows of anti-reformers	Violence between pro and anti-reform crowds	Violence between crowd and constables at reform event	Other
	In Person	In Carriage	Houses				
Number of disturbances	3	7	3	12	3	6	5

Table 3: Principal content of disturbance events (Oct-Dec 1831)

Regarding the second category, damage to anti-reformers property, we have already noted that this type of event occurred at the very beginning of the serious riots in Derby and Nottingham, and appeared in Birmingham, though did not escalate. It was also the feature of more minor events in Totnes, Manchester, Wareham, Mansfield, Brecon and several other locales. Of particular note in these events was the local knowledge and selectivity of targets, as well as the limits to the violence inflicted.

The third category, violence between the agents of the authorities and protestors at reform related events, was typically initiated by the actions or reactions of police or special constables. Examples include the attack on the “disorderly rabble” by Police at the Tron Church in Edinburgh, the deployment of Police to stop Henry Hunt and a thousand of his supporters crossing Westminster Bridge on the evening of 10 October and the fracas which broke out at the end of a reform meeting in Sloane Square when the audience attempted to rescue a ‘pickpocket’ who had been arrested by Police Officers.

Regarding the third category and these examples of police and crowd interactions, it is important to note that the period of the reform crisis was concurrent with important modifications to the existing hierarchy of law-and-order enforcement. This had been based on the regular military, local part-time Yeomanry, parish constables, watchmen and contingency driven, irregular special constables. This structure underwent the addition of the professional police which over the rest of the century gradually replaced most of the requirements for the parish and Special Constables. For example, the ‘New Police’, as they were known, appeared in London by Act of Parliament as the Metropolitan Police Force in 1829, only two years before the reform crisis, and many other cities followed suit soon after. There was significant working-class opposition to the ‘New Police’ across the country as they were perceived by some “as a *political*, not a *protective* force” and resented by many others for “their interference in neighbourhood and recreational life”.¹⁶ Interactions between London crowds and the ‘New Police’ during the reform disturbances thus need to be understood within this context.

Having concluded this survey of reform-related protest events in October-December 1831 we will now turn towards more detailed accounts of the spread of the news of the defeat of the Second Reform Bill and the public reactions that followed.

See Part 2: In the metropolis...

prominent anti-reformer. *The Times* 20 October 1831; *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 28 October 1831; *The Sun*, 18 October 1831; *Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser*, 9 November 1831.

¹⁶ Storch, Robert D., and F. Engels. “The Plague of the Blue Locusts: Police Reform and Popular Resistance in Northern England, 1840–57.” *International Review of Social History* 20, no. 1 (1975): 61–90. doi:10.1017/S002085900004843.