The period from 1815 to 1820 has been characterized as the 'heroic age of popular radicalism', an era in which Radicalism was transformed from the minority propaganda of the 1790s into a highly popular political programme. Liverpool, despite being the largest provincial English town, is largely absent from accounts of this reform movement in these years. While Liverpool was in no sense a strong centre of Radicalism, it can be shown that there was in fact a significant level of reform sentiment and activity in the town. Liverpool reform meetings in this era drew crowds of between 2,000 and 10,000, depending on which newspaper's figures one accepts. A petition for reform in 1817 mustered 14,000 signatures. In part, the absence of a discussion of the Liverpool reformers in the general accounts of the post-war movement, may be due to the fact that local reformers represent something of an anomaly to the national pattern. While nationally the reform movement of these years appears to have been largely working class, with little middle-class support, in Liverpool the situation was, if anything, the reverse: strong, middle-class support for reform, with little reform sentiment among the working class.

It is possible that further local studies may challenge how far Liverpool's experience was in fact anomalous; perhaps the sheer vitality of the working-class movement elsewhere may have obscured middle-class reform efforts in these
years. Yet it will be argued that a complex web of factors can largely explain Liverpool’s divergence from the main tendencies of national political developments in these years.

The high level of middle-class support for reform is indicated by a petition for household suffrage in May 1819, limited to householders only, which was signed by 1,000 persons. A petition opposing the six Acts received 1,548 ‘respectable names’ in six hours, without the publicity of a meeting, in December 1819. The major reform organisation in the town, the Concentric Society, was an entirely middle-class body, with a membership of over 1,000 in 1819. Members were, it seems, largely tradesmen and the professional middle class, but there were also a significant number of richer merchants and bankers.

While there was thus a significant level of middle-class support for reform, there is little evidence of working-class support. There was no independent working-class radical organisation. Joseph Mitchell, the Liverpool reformer who became embroiled with Oliver, the Government spy, was a member of the Concentric Society. When Mitchell brought Oliver to Liverpool in March 1817 as part of the latter’s notorious tour, it is indicative of the lack of working-class reform activity that he introduced Oliver to respectable leading members of the Concentric Society – who apparently gave them both short shrift. The Liverpool middle class were not afraid that the working class of the town would become embroiled in any political rebellion. As a result of the nationwide fear of an armed uprising in the aftermath of Peterloo, the mayor privately but extensively issued a circular calling on the middle class to enrol as specials. Only two men responded!

The Liverpool reform movement in these years was dominated by the middle class, both in terms of its organisational support and its tenor. Yet while it has been shown that there was little or no independent working-class radical activity, this is not to say that there was no working-class support for the Concentric initiatives. The sizes of the crowds at the reform meetings, and the numbers who signed the various petitions, indicate a moderate level of working-class support. There is also some evidence of support for reform among the trades.

It can be argued that what the Concentrics were offering to the working class was the kind of leadership given by the middle class as a whole in the struggle over the Reform Bill in 1830–2. This can be seen in terms of both policy and
tactics. While the Concentrics accepted universal manhood suffrage ‘in principle’, their policy was to ‘see what we can get’. Again, they were to anticipate the Reform Bill struggle by realising that the support of the working class, in imposing mass constitutional pressure on the Government, was essential. Given what we know of 1830–2, it should not seem surprising that the Concentrics appeared to be the natural leadership in the struggle, to the working class reformers of Liverpool. This also helps to explain why the working class did not establish independent reform organisations.

It would be wrong to picture the Concentric Society as somehow isolated, outside the mainstream of the nationally largely working-class reform movement, on account of its middle-class character. The society sent a delegate to the crucial meeting of provincial Hampden clubs in 1817. The leading Concentrics seem to have enjoyed the respect of reformers elsewhere. Four of the eight men invited to speak at Peterloo were from Liverpool: Dr. Peter Crompton, Edward Rushton junior, John Smith and Thomas Smith. All four in fact turned down the invitation, according to the Liverpool Mercury from a consensus that ‘each town should express its own views on the question’. John Smith in his reply to Henry Hunt, assured him that his reasons for declining to speak were ‘perfectly free from any disrespect towards the meeting, or its conductors’. He attended as a reporter and wrote a harrowing eye-witness account of the massacre for the Mercury. He also subsequently gave evidence at Hunt’s trial in his defence.

The Liverpool reformers received largely the same treatment from the Government as those elsewhere. It is true that when the Concentric Society continued to meet after March 1817, it escaped suppression. But individual members did not. The Government was bound to be suspicious once Oliver had been among them. James Casey joined Cobbett in exile. Edward Rushton junior was dining with friends in May 1817, when he was told that Oliver and the authorities were coming to arrest him. He left immediately and spent some time on the Continent. William Rathbone IV, the wealthy local merchant and a prominent reformer since the 1780s, was told that he was on Castlereagh’s blacklist, with the comment ‘Dangerous, done nothing yet’. Peterloo heightened the air of suppression. At the Liverpool reform meeting two weeks after Peterloo, the Liverpool Light Horse and a ‘multitude’ of special
constables were standing by. During one speech, ‘the people at the outskirts of the meeting, near Casey Street, were alarmed by some accidental noise resembling the sound of a drum’, until order was restored from the platform.12

Edward Thompson, in assessing the Government’s response to the post-war radical movement, has commented:

Confronted by this swelling power, Old Corruption faced the alternatives of meeting the reformers with repression or concession. But concession, in 1819 would have meant concession to a largely working-class reform movement; the middle-class reformers were not yet strong enough (as they were in 1832) to offer a more moderate line of advance. This is why Peterloo took place.13

Two crucial questions must now be considered. Why was it that the middle class of Liverpool were strong enough to offer that more moderate line of advance? And how, on the other hand, can the relative weakness of reform sentiment among the Liverpool working class be explained?

II
THE MIDDLE CLASS AND REFORM

In Liverpool the middle-class reformers formed a society with a thousand members. In Manchester, they ‘remained no more than a group of like-minded friends—“a small but determined band”’.14 It might be argued that this owed something to differences in the occupational structure of the middle class in the two towns— one geared more to manufacture, the other to trade. Yet generally Toryism was more rife in the mercantile community, liberalism more popular among manufacturers.

The Concentric Society was formed in 1812, and so one needs to examine events in the war years to understand the strength of middle-class reform sentiment in Liverpool. There had been a small but influential group of reformers in the town since the 1780s – the famous Roscoe circle. They had played an important role in opposition to the slave trade, opposition to the wars with France, and in promoting parliamentary reform.15 Yet there was a similar, if perhaps less influential group in Manchester, so clearly in themselves they cannot explain the popularity of reform among Liverpool’s middle class in the post-war period.
The involvement of Liverpool's middle class in politics owed something to the divisions within the merchant elite. By 1800 a group of specialist Liverpool American trade merchants had emerged. These opposed the mercantilist policies which favoured the West Indian/African trade merchant elite. Many of those in the American trade were also Dissenters, which pushed them further towards reform politics. The issue of the Orders in council increased their determination to wrest the two Liverpool Parliamentary seats from the West Indian/African trade merchants. They solicited the support of the middle class for their petitions against the Orders in Council; they also needed the middle class to act as an army of canvassers in election campaigns.

Yet the fact that they were so keen to solicit the support of the middle class does not explain why it was so forthcoming. Partly this was forthcoming because the interest of the wealthy merchants in reform made the issue such a respectable one. In many parts of the country parliamentary reform still smacked of revolution. Above all, however, we must look at the franchise to understand the popularity of reform among the Liverpool middle class. Reform also carried no connotations of revolution and bloodshed in the town because a sizeable section of the working class already had the vote. Yet far from being radical in their views, they, as will be shown, appeared to be either pro-Tory, or at least controlled at elections by the influence and bribery of the Tory merchants. The Liverpool middle class, unlike their counterparts in many areas of the country, were not scared off the reform issue by the apparent rebelliousness of the lower orders.

If these factors prevented reform from having seditious connotations, what actually propelled the middle class towards reform was a sense of exclusion. If members of the working class had the vote, then surely the middle class ought to have that right also. This sense of exclusion was particularly acute in Liverpool, because artisans made up such a high proportion of the electorate – an estimated sixty six per cent in 1812. Of eight large freeman boroughs with more than a thousand voters for which Frank O'Gorman has provided statistical evidence, only Nottingham with sixty five per cent in the artisan class comes anywhere near the Liverpool figure, the others ranging from twenty one to forty four per cent. This exclusion was further heightened by the fact that though originally practically all adult males
had the vote, by 1812 this had declined to only about one in four.

Exclusion in itself, however, is not a sufficient explanation, given the lack of comparable middle-class support for reform in these years. The difference was that in places like Nottingham reform did have connotations of revolution, in these years of the 'illegal tradition' and the Luddite disturbances. The strength of middle-class reform politics in Liverpool can only be understood once the lack of radicalism among the town’s working class has been explained.

The close-fought Liverpool election in 1812, when the reformers nearly snatched both seats, sealed the involvement of the middle class in reform politics. The Concentric Society was now able to focus and strengthen middle-class reform endeavour. In May 1813 a petition for parliamentary reform organised by the Concentrics received over 6,000 signatures, and a series of meetings was held. A further petition calling for an ‘extension’ of the franchise in July received 8,000 signatures. Reform was a popular programme with the Liverpool middle class long before the wars ended.

III

THE WORKING CLASS AND REFORM

The lack of working-class involvement in reform has tended to be assumed by those writing about other aspects of Liverpool’s history in this period. It is suggested that this was a reflection of the fact that Liverpool was almost totally dependent on its role as a port, and was not a manufacturing centre of any consequence. Thus, it is argued, most of the workers in the town were unskilled, whether involved in the loading and unloading of ships, or in the construction of the docks. The few industries which actually expanded with the port, such as soap-boiling and sugar-refining, are also pictured as requiring largely unskilled labour. Industries with skilled workers which had flourished in the eighteenth century, such as shipbuilding and pottery, were in decline after 1800. After 1800, the labour force of the town is characterised as increasingly casual and unskilled, the economy of the town becoming even more dominated by its role as a port. Such a workforce, it is generally agreed,
could have little connection with trade unionism or working-class radicalism at this time.

However, it can be demonstrated that the impression of the occupational structure given is rather misleading. Contemporary commentators like W. Cooke Taylor highlighted what set Liverpool apart, but in the process overemphasized the importance of dock labour. A study of the 1841 census figures of occupation does much to challenge the accepted view of an overwhelmingly unskilled and casual male workforce. The analysis I have undertaken shows that 32.3 per cent of males over the age of twenty enumerated in Liverpool were employed in ‘manufacture’. This is a far greater figure than that suggested by the generally accepted view of the nature of the labour force. 21 Throughout this period, Liverpool remained a major centre of manufacturing. The fact that this has not been recognised is probably a result of erroneously equating manufacture with steam power and factory production, resulting in too much emphasis being placed on just one branch of manufacture – the production of textiles. In the country as a whole, throughout this period, manufacture remained largely on a ‘handicraft’ basis: small-scale, unmechanised and labour intensive, based both in small workshops and still to a large extent in the home – a contrast of combined and uneven development. The demand for such everyday items as clothes, shoes and furniture in each town was still largely met by workers making those goods in that particular town. Before 1850, the clothes, shoes, furniture and other basic goods bought by Liverpool people were still largely made by Liverpool workers. The fast growth of the town meant that the demand for such goods was rapidly increasing in these years. With no changes in technology in these trades, this growth led to a large increase in the number of shoemakers, tailors, cabinet-makers etc. in the town throughout the period. 22 While shipbuilding was in decline, ship repair was naturally growing as rapidly as the trade of the port. It is also surely a mistake to exclude those employed in building from any calculation of the numbers involved in ‘industry’ or ‘manufacture’. The unparalleled growth of Liverpool in these years renders this of particular importance. Indeed, it can be argued that in 1841 42.6 per cent of adult men were employed in what can be designated manufacture. 23

The artisans in these trades – building, tailoring, shoe-making and the like – were the backbone of the trade union
and working-class radical movement in the country as a whole. Liverpool, like many other areas, had a strong trade union movement based around these trades, with roots going back to at least the 1750s. The climactic seamen’s strike of 1775 overshadowed more piecemeal yet much more permanent developments in a large number of trades in these years. At the opening of Princes’ dock in 1821, for example, over thirty organised trades were present. If artisans in Liverpool were a smaller proportion of the male workforce, they were well organised, and they were powerful. In this sense, therefore, there was much more potential support for Radicalism among the working class in Liverpool than was actually realised. We must therefore look to other factors to account for this lack of radical sentiment.

How far does such an explanation lie in peculiarities of Liverpool’s experience of the war years? There is some evidence of working-class radicalism in the 1790s, but far less than in many other areas. It is possible that loyalism was a more powerful force in Liverpool than elsewhere. With the navy playing such a vital role in Britain’s war strategy, probably a higher proportion of Liverpool’s men were directly involved in the fighting than was the case in most towns. It is possible that this made the war more popular in Liverpool and thus heightened the counter-revolutionary nationalism fostered by the ruling class. Yet if the seamen and their families had a share in the spoils of war, from the bounties on captured vessels, they also had a larger share of the loss of life and limb. The activities of press gangs in the town did nothing for the popularity of the war. There seems to have been an intermittent guerilla warfare between the press gangs and the shipwrights in particular, leading to several riots. The war appears to have lost much of its early popularity by 1797. A meeting in April against the war drew a crowd of 5,000, with the two sides fairly equally divided.

If their opposition to the war did not necessarily make the Liverpool reformers unpopular with the working class, their opposition to the slave trade certainly appears to have done so. The trade was seen by many working people as vital to their prosperity. At the 1807 election Roscoe and his supporters were attacked by angry crowds, after he had voted in Parliament for abolition. However, it does not seem likely that the issue had much importance after abolition in 1807. The fears that abolition would cause
unparalleled distress were unfounded, as the ships involved in the trade rapidly found new markets to exploit.29

The growing connection between reform and the American trade was a more important factor in limiting working class support. For the American trade was largely carried in American ships. This trade therefore, it can be argued, provided little work for those employed in shipbuilding, repair or shipping services generally, or perhaps for Liverpool seamen. On the other hand, the West Indies trade of the Tory merchants was carried in British ships, and thus provided proportionately more employment for these workers. The issue was certainly played up in this way in some election squibs.30 And according to one local employer, giving evidence to the 1833 parliamentary enquiry into bribery at Liverpool elections, this had important implications at elections:

I have been always of opinion that a West India merchant in Liverpool is a rather formidable opponent at an election, for they employ so many shipwrights, and so many in the ramifications of those trades, that I believe that the person that opposes a West India merchant stands a very poor chance.

This, he agreed, stemmed not from any direct control over the votes, but from 'a disposition in the workmen generally to support persons whom they consider friendly to them in the employment that they give'.31 It is difficult to assess how this was seen by the working class themselves. It may help to explain the particular weakness of working-class radicalism in Liverpool because it was so specific: nowhere else was the American trade so important, or so closely connected to reform.

One can argue, however, that the key to any explanation of the lack of working-class radicalism, as in explaining the strength of middle-class radicalism, lies with the peculiarities of the local franchise. A high proportion of the working class were able to vote. Originally votes for freemen had been tantamount to universal manhood suffrage. However, as the franchise was only passed on to the sons of freemen, or those who served an apprenticeship under a freeman, the proportion of men with the vote was bound to fall. I have estimated that the freemen made up about fifteen to twenty per cent of all adult males in 1830, and about twenty five per cent in 1812.32 Though these were significant percentages, they were even higher among the artisans. It is possible to
estimate that forty per cent of artisans qualified as freemen in 1830, and perhaps sixty per cent back in 1812. As such workers were the backbone of the Radical movement in the country as a whole, what are the implications that such a high (though falling) proportion of them already had the vote in Liverpool?

If it is to be argued that the vote nullified radical sentiment, then it must be considered what the benefits of the franchise were, and how far they outweighed the perceived benefits of reform. It must also be considered whether the freemen may have actually opposed reform through a fear that the widening of the franchise would destroy their elite status and thus any benefits they accrued from the franchise.

In some eyes, however, such questions would seem irrelevant. The pre-reform electorate has traditionally been characterized as controlled by deference and influence. The vote was not a commodity that could be used by working men to gain any benefit. At the 1812 election, Brougham certainly believed that the voters were largely controlled by their social superiors: ‘You are to know then that Liverpool is in fact a close boro! The inhabitants are 100,000. The voters under 3,000, in general the worst and most dependent people (not to say the lowest) in the town’. Yet in his opinion influence was more important than deference in this control:

Each shipowner, shipbuilder etc., has a certain number of the freemen in his service – and these men vote as a matter of course with their masters. Canning’s friends are the shipping interest – ours the American Trades and Country Gentlemen. The former have, if united with the Corporation, a larger number in their service than the latter – and, therefore, being combined together in this instance, they carried the day. The men in voting constantly said to me, ‘Our heart is with you – but what can we do’ – this even on the Hustings.

However, if such influence was so great, one is left wondering how so many working-class voters were able to vote for Brougham and Creevey, in one of the closest elections in Liverpool’s history! This is not to deny that such influence was not used. In 1816 the Mercury received a list of thirty men, principally shipwrights, who had been sacked for voting as they wished, including the president of the shipwrights’ union. Yet the fact that these men were willing to risk the sack weakens the argument that votes could be controlled. The influence of employers in 1812 and
1816 was probably exceptional as these were years of acute distress and high unemployment.

This evidence is in line with the view of Frank O’Gorman, that ‘most electors in most constituencies did not lack the independence to engage in a deferential relationship’. O’Gorman has forcefully criticized the traditional notion of electoral deference, which seems to be little more than ‘Either a blind respect for the elite or ... a mindless acceptance of economic inequality’. He stresses that deference should not be confused with dependence, and shows that contemporaries understood the term as having the quality of mutuality. There was a price to be paid for control, and elections were part of that price. What must be considered is how far this ‘price’ was different in Liverpool given two unusual features of Liverpool elections: the high proportion of working-class voters, and the importance of the seat because of the vast commercial interests that were represented.

In many respects, Liverpool elections do appear to have conformed to the pattern outlined by Frank O’Gorman. They were a spectacle, a festival involving the whole town for a period of up to several weeks. Candidates had to create an impression of popular support, not only among the freemen, but also with the population as a whole. Bands were hired, colours and ribbons distributed, processions organised. Though no doubt exaggerated, the Mercury’s claim that 30,000 people, including 400 on horseback, took part in the procession of the defeated Earl of Sefton at the close of the poll in 1818, is at least an indication of the magnitude of popular involvement.

As much a part of any election as the ‘spectacle’ was the customary ‘treating’, whether in beer, food, or other refreshments. Certainly it is possible, given the importance of Liverpool as a seat, that this was more lavish than elsewhere. During the 1818 election, Elizabeth Rathbone wrote of a Dr. Soloman:

He has written a circular to about 500 freemen inviting them to breakfast with him on Thursday at Gilead House, and has requested a band of music from the Committee ... he will then divide them into classes, and when the election is over give each class with their wives and daughters a dance at Gilead House.

Direct bribes in cash were always a feature of Liverpool elections. Again it is possible that this was on a scale greater
than elsewhere. In the most extreme case, the by-election of 1830, votes are said to have been worth £2 to £5 on the first day, up to as much as £50 towards the close of the poll. Generally it appears that a minimum price was a day’s wages, to cover loss of earnings on polling day.39

A feature of Liverpool elections which may have been more unusual was the prominent part played by the trades. Many trades took part in the processions of candidates, at least from 1816 onwards.40 Also at this election, and certainly in 1812, trades such as the shipwrights and sailmakers held meetings, which the candidates addressed. On the eve of the 1816 election a handbill announced a meeting of the ‘Freemen of the Shipwrights’ Society’ in their clubroom, ‘to take consideration the most proper means to secure to them their rights of election’.41 These ‘rights of election’ appear to have been bribes received on behalf of the trade as a whole. John Kirwin, the President of the Shipwrights’ Union, in giving evidence to the Select Committee on Artisans and Machinery in 1824, referred to ‘a few donations given to us by gentlemen in the town’, amounting to around £70, including one from the present mayor before he took up office. The records of the society also revealed that five anonymous donations amounting to £98 10s were made on the eve of the election in March 1820. John Cain, the secretary, stated that two of these were from John Drinkwater and John Gladstone, the two most prominent supporters of George Canning, the successful candidate at this election.42

It is unclear how far such organised bribery occurred elsewhere, or whether the unusually high proportion of artisans among the voters in Liverpool created conditions which were exceptionally favourable to this. Frank O’Gorman, however, does mention specific occupational payments to certain trades and guilds for the making free of freemen in other towns.43 These bribes may have been used in this way in Liverpool, given the £2 charge for becoming a freeman.

A clear difference between Liverpool and the large freeman boroughs as a whole (those with over 1,000 voters) was in the proportion of contested elections. At the thirteen general elections between 1780 and 1831, the rate of contested elections at the large freeman boroughs was 18.1 per cent.44 In Liverpool practically all elections were contested. Partly this was because Liverpool was such an important seat, and there were powerful rival commercial interests,
fighting for control. However, the working-class freemen enjoyed the power to force a contest even when this was not desired by the ruling commercial interests.

The best example of this occurred in 1790. The two sitting M.P.'s formed a coalition, so that votes would be split between them. The third candidate, Colonel Tarleton, therefore withdrew and left town, which allowed the sitting M.P.'s to ‘turn off the taps’. The freemen, denied their customary treating, then voted for Tarleton in large numbers, which led to a closely-fought contest, with Tarleton returned at the head of the poll! In 1823 Huskisson wrote to his wife:

The Rabble of this place will never, I see clearly, allow an Election without a Contest . . . I am now wishing heartily that I had been at Chichester – so quiet and so complacent – instead of having the battle to fight here.

O'Gorman argues that elections retained their power to keep up a deferential relationship between voters and their social superiors even after 1815, even as deference among the working-class in general collapsed, that ‘nothing is more significant than the relative failure of electoral radicalism to assert itself both before and after 1832’.

It can be argued, however, that amid the great changes in working-class politics after 1815, it is unlikely that the Liverpool working-class voter would have continued to be satisfied with so little for his vote. After all what did it amount to? Little more than a public holiday, a few pints and a few shillings every few years, perhaps a couple of week’s wages if he was lucky; and the chance to hear the candidate speak at his trade club. The non-voters enjoyed only the spectacle, the possibility of being treated to a few pints along with workmates who were freemen, and the chance to revel in the humiliation of social superiors. Nor in Liverpool did freeman status convey the kind of other rights which, according to Peter Searby, gave rise to an alternative political tradition for the Coventry freemen, in defence of those rights.

One can argue, however, that even before 1815, the power of the working-class at Liverpool elections had forced other concessions in exchange for votes than those outlined by Frank O'Gorman. The Liverpool M.P.'s were forced to respond to the desires and protect the interests of their largely working-class constituents, even if this might force them to take up stances in Parliament which were opposed
to their own political principles. Such was the power of the Liverpool trades that this could already be seen at the time of the passing of the Combination Acts in 1799. In June 1800, Isaac Gascoyne, one of the two Liverpool M.P.'s, presented a petition from the ‘Labourers, Mechanics and Artificers’ of Liverpool, which complained that they had not heard of the Combination Act of the previous year until it had been passed into law, and therefore had not had chance to petition against it. On June 30th Gascoyne brought up the issue in the house, arguing that the Act put the workmen ‘a great deal at the mercy of the masters’. He ‘pledged himself to bring proofs to the bar of gross oppression having been suffered under the bill’ and called for its amendment. Tarleton, the other Liverpool M.P., argued that the bill should be repealed. Both were then appointed to a committee of five to prepare what would become the amending Act of 1800. Yet such actions were not a guarantee of votes. Tarleton was defeated by Roscoe in 1806.

Sometimes the M.P.'s solicited the votes of individual trades through their Parliamentary actions. At the 1806 election a notice was posted, ‘To the leather trade, calling on them to meet to consider how to return General Gascoyne “in consideration of the essential services he has rendered the trade”.’ Yet there were some trades which were much more likely to benefit than others. The number of freemen of each trade varied considerably. Nor was it necessarily the largest trades which had the most votes, or the highest proportion of freemen in their ranks. Table 2.1 shows the number of voters in selected trades in 1830. There was an overwhelming bias towards the waterside trades, particularly the shipwrights, and against trades such as tailoring and shoemaking.

This was probably a result of the fact that in shipbuilding and repair, coopering and sailmaking etc., firms tended to be well-established and hence more likely to be run by a freeman, and so apprentices would become freemen. Tailoring on the other hand expanded particularly rapidly in the war years, with drapers, who were less likely to be freemen, through not serving an apprenticeship, beginning to employ an increasing proportion of the journeymen. Whatever the reason, the shipwrights in particular enjoyed a great deal of power at Liverpool elections. What evidence is there that this power gave them special privileges?

Ten master shipwrights from Liverpool, in giving evi-
dence to the Select Committee on Artisans and Machinery in 1824, complained that the magistrates had failed to do their full duty to prevent outbreaks of violence, in industrial disputes with both the shipwrights and ship-sawyers. One of their complaints was that the mayor had refused to put his name to a £100 reward they had brought forward against those causing violence in the ship-sawyers' strike, then taking place. They inferred a connection with the fact that several magistrates had given donations to the likes of the shipwrights' society at election times. 02

In March 1822 the Liverpool Mercury published a letter describing the tarring of some strikebreakers by shipwrights. The editorial commented that such events, 'if suffered to pass without any effort to bring the ringleaders to justice, will subject the magistrates to the foul suspicion of looking rather to the poll book than the statute book'. During a strike by ropers in 1825, in which there were many scenes of violence, the Mercury commented:

We regret to be obliged to state, that whenever outrages similar to that which have occasioned these remarks, have disgraced this town, the magistrates, in general, have failed in the prompt and fearless discharge of their duty. Whether their supineness has arisen from personal fear, or from a species of influence arising out of the state of the elective franchise in this town, we know not. 53

When, Statham, the clerk of the peace, and Topham, his deputy, had the opportunity to counter such accusations at the 1824 Select Committee, they did little to allay such suspicions. 54 Statham argued that the mayor had rejected the £100 reward of the masters, arguing instead that it ought to come out of Corporation funds. But it was never put up, even though only two shipwrights were convicted in the dispute. Statham also admitted that during one shipwright's dispute in 1819:

I stated that several of the masters had come to the magistrates to send constables down; but that there was no use in sending twenty constables among 500 carpenters, that it would be ineffectual to do that.

Yet the magistrates never called out the military for assistance during any of the shipwrights' disputes, even though violent attacks on strikebreakers and their employers did occur. 55 The magistrates for their part accused the masters of always backing down in any prosecution of the men, 'either from unwillingness or fear'. The masters them-
selves admitted that this had been the case on a number of occasions, as they were afraid as individuals to prosecute any men, for fear of intimidation. The employers thus actually supported repeal of the Combinations Acts, so that they could legally combine in any prosecution. \[56\]

The experience of one master shipwright in particular, Charles Grayson, most clearly shows the unwillingness of the magistrates to act against the journeymen. Grayson was involved in a series of disputes with the men in 1820, and for a time was forced to leave Liverpool and set up business in Tranmere. In 1821 he brought over twenty to thirty men from Cheshire, who were not members of the union, to undertake a job in Liverpool. When Grayson sought protection for his men from the mayor, Topham admitted that the mayor had told him he should identify any trouble-makers himself, for ‘if he or the police officers were there, nothing would arise from which they themselves could afterwards act’. When constables were sent down, they did not arrest any of the journeymen, but instead Grayson himself, who was found guilty of an assault on a journeyman shipwright! Grayson was then forced out of business until he made a full public apology to the shipwrights’ society. Another master was forced to pay £100 to the society to make his peace. \[57\]

The master shipwrights were quite clear as to why the men were able to have such power over them. In 1827 their Association resolved:

\[58\]

As a result of their power at the polls, the shipwrights were able to enforce a range of measures to combat the under-employment that inevitably stemmed from the casual nature of ship-repair work. They were able to enforce a closed shop, over 800-strong by 1824. \[59\] They had been able to ban all piece work on repairs after 1817. They could limit the use of apprentices, and preserve customary manning levels on the laying down of blocks and other preparations for bringing a ship into dock. They could even replace foremen of whom they did not approve with their own nominees. All of these measures had to be fought for, often literally. But with the magistrates unwilling to act against
them, even acting against the employers in the case of Grayson, they were able to impose them. Their power was fully demonstrated by Grayson’s public humiliation. It can also be seen from their bank balance: over £2200 in 1824. In 1823 they opened sixteen almshouses for their retired members; with a large club room above.\textsuperscript{60}

The shipwrights, as a body, freemen and non-freemen, made considerable gains from the franchise. They could have no interest in reform. There is evidence that this extended to other shipping-related trades with a large number of freemen among them – such as coopers, ropers, ship-sawyers and sailmakers.\textsuperscript{61} What emerges from an examination of all the strikes of this period is a difference in the attitude of the authorities towards the strikers, depending on the importance of each trade at elections. In the series of conflicts between the shipwrights and their employers between 1818 and 1821, there were many violent attacks on strikebreakers, who were often also tarred, and even masters were attacked. Yet no shipwrights were imprisoned as a result of these attacks. The only successful prosecution was that of an employer, Grayson. The unwillingness of the magistrates to act left the masters in such a weak position that they dropped several prosecutions.\textsuperscript{62}

Contrast this with the tailors’ strike of 1823. A large firm in the trade in Lord Street took a number of out-door workers, not belonging to the trade society, to work on their premises, in a separate workshop to the regular journeymen. When the workshop was attacked, constables promptly arrested six of the society men, and they were sentenced to three or six months in Kirkdale jail. A number of shoemakers were given one month’s hard labour during a similar dispute in the previous year.\textsuperscript{63} At the same time that the authorities were acting against Grayson in 1821, the mayor warned striking corn-porters that he would swear in special constables if necessary, and warrants were issued against several men who had attacked those who had returned to work.\textsuperscript{64}

Whether the building artisan trades, with a much smaller proportion of freemen among them than the riverside trades, but considerably more than the tailors and shoemakers, were able to turn electoral power into industrial power is less evident. What is clear, however, is their close identification with the riverside trades at elections, demonstrated, for example, by their equal prominence in the procession to mark the chairing of George Canning in 1816.
In the procession there were (in order) with six colours each, shipwrights, ropemakers, sailmakers, smiths, blockmakers, riggers, painters, coopers, pilots, bricklayers and masons, joiners and other trades.63

Through the organisation of their trade unions, a large section of Liverpool’s working class were able to gain not only money for their votes, but also force their M.P.’s to protect the rights of trade unionists in Parliament. Further than this, the riverside trades, those with the highest proportions of freemen among them, were able to turn electoral power into power at their workplaces, through the unwillingness of the mayor and magistrates to act against them, and risk losing their support at elections. The peculiar character of Liverpool’s pre-reform franchise is thus the key element in explaining the relative lack of working-class radicalism in the town. Ironically, the same factor, the franchise, largely explains the peculiar strength of middle-class reform endeavour.

NOTES


7 For a detailed analysis of the political views of the Concentrics, Moore, ‘Whig and Tory Ridden Town’, pp. 82–6.

8 Thomas Hulme, the Concentric’s delegate, was the only one from Liverpool, and he was instructed to give ‘absolute acquiescence’ to the decisions reached by the ‘Assembly of Deputies’, *Mercury*, 24 Jan. 1817, p. 3.

10 *Mercury*, 20 Aug. 1819, p. 3; p. 1.
19 *Mercury*, 7 May 1813, pp. 258–60; 16 July 1813, p. 22.
21 Brogden, for example, in *Police: Autonomy and Consent*, erroneously accepts a figure of five per cent in ‘direct manufacture’ in 1850. This is a result of a misinterpretation of the figures given in Thomas Baines, *Liverpool in 1859* (Liverpool 1859); those engaged in the ‘mechanical arts’ are included under a separate heading in Baines’ classification. Iain Taylor has estimated that 28.5 per cent of the male labour force over twenty years were engaged in manufacture in 1851: ‘Black Spot on the Mersey’, Table 4.1. Brogden’s whole analysis of the nature of the policing problems in Liverpool in this period is therefore open to question. For my analysis of the 1841 census, Moore, ‘Whig and Tory Ridden Town’, pp. 8–9, and Appendix One.
23 My analysis gives a figure of 7,419 men employed in building, 10.3 per cent of all males aged over twenty.


30 For example see Liverpool Election, 23 Nov. 1830 . . . The Squib Book, containing the whole of the songs, Squibs etc. (Liverpool, 1831) p. 10. As regards the seamen, in 1850 a shipping master employed by the American liners to ‘ship’ their crews estimated that about half of the crews of American ships were English or Scottish: Morning Chronicle, 26 Aug. 1850.

31 Evidence of Samuel Holme, builder, Report from the Select Committee on Liverpool Borough Elections, inquiring into matters complained of in the Petition of Electors PP1833 (583) X, p. 357.

32 Based on an estimate of 6,000 qualified freemen (registered and unregistered) in 1833, Select Committee appointed to inquire into the petition on Liverpool Borough. PP 1833 (139), X, p. 46, and the number of adult males returned in the 1831 census. The 1812 figure is a proportionate estimate based on the number of voters in the election of that year compared with 1830.

33 Based on the estimate of 6,000 freemen in 1833, and an analysis of the 1831 census, which gives a figure of approximately 15,500 adult male artisans in that year: 1831 Census, Enumeration Abstract. Vol 1, PP 1833, pp. 306–9. 1812 estimate proportionately as for all adult males.

34 University College, University of London, Brougham to John Allen, 28 Oct., 1812, Brougham MSS, 52178.

35 Mercury, 28 June 1816, p. 416.


37 Mercury, 26 June 1818, p. 8.

38 Elizabeth Rathbone to her mother-in-law, 18 June 1818, quoted in Emily A. Rathbone, Records of the Rathbone Family (Edinburgh 1913), p. 181.


40 The Speeches and Public Addresses of the Right Hon. George Canning during the
Election in Liverpool . . . 1816, to which is appended a summary Account of the Election (Liverpool, 1816), p. vii.

41 The Squib-Book . . . The Liverpool Election, 1816 (Liverpool 1816), p. 50.
42 Parliamentary Papers, Select Committee on Artisans and Machinery, 1824, V, pp. 203, 238; Mercury, 24 March, 1820, p. 320.
44 O’Gorman, ‘Unreformed electorate’, p. 36.
45 Richard Brooke, Liverpool as it was, During the last Quarter of the Eighteenth Century, 1775 to 1800 (Liverpool 1853), pp. 396–7; J.A. Picton, Memorials of Liverpool, Vol 1 (Liverpool, 1875), p. 228.
50 History of the Election for Members of parliament for the Borough of Liverpool, 1806 (Liverpool, 1806), pp. 7–8.
51 It is important to note that this does not include the 870 freemen who failed to vote, or those who qualified as freemen but had not yet registered (estimated at 2,400 men in 1833): Menzies, ‘Freemen Voter in Liverpool’, p. 89; Moore, ‘Whig and Tory Ridden Town’, p. 222. The proportions of freemen and potential freemen in each trade were thus much greater than this table suggests.
52 Select Committee on Artisans and Machinery, pp. 183–202.
54 Select Committee on Artisans and Machinery, pp. 350–355, for their evidence.
55 For these disputes, see the evidence of the employers, Ibid., pp. 183–202.
56 Ibid., pp. 353, 201.
57 Ibid., pp. 191–2, 200–1, 354.
58 Rathbone, ‘Shipwrights’ Trades’ Societies’, p. 492.
59 Select Committee on Artisans and Machinery, p. 202. When asked if all were members, John Kirwin, the president of the Liverpool Shipwrights’ Union replied ‘Yes, within a few; there may be a few straggling about’.
60 See the evidence of the two Liverpool shipwrights’ union officials, Ibid., pp. 202–38. A model of the almshouses is on display at the Merseyside Museum of Labour History.
62 Select Committee on Artisans and Machinery, p. 351.
63 Mercury, 4 July 1823, p. 8; 1 March, 1822, p. 278.
64 Ibid., 4 May, 1821, pp. 362, 368; 11 May 1821, p. 374.