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What Did Chartism Petition For?: Mass Petitions in the British Movement for Democracy

Chartism was in effect Britain's civil rights movement and petitioning was at its heart: it defined who the Chartists were as well as the "other" against which they were implacably opposed. Its history has been effectively narrated around its three National Petitions (1839, 1842 and 1848), and its decline almost habitually and directly linked to circumstances surrounding the last of these. More than 3.3 million people signed the 1842 national petition. Chartism's history after it is partly one of how the State learned to manage the movement in general and petitioning in particular.

Yet historians, fixated by the numbers of signatories, have paid scant attention either to the language of these petitions or the way in which they shaped the "ways and means" of the movement. The question posed by the title is deliberately ambiguous: what did the Chartists petition for and, equally, why did they bother? The first issue will be answered by a close reading of the three texts (surprisingly not undertaken by previous historians of the movement). The second will be answered through an analysis of the wider uses of petitioning. Chartists expected their petitions to be rejected, sharing as they did the premise that Parliament acted exclusively in the selfish interests of its members and those able to vote for them. Extra-parliamentary agitations were hedged around by legal restrictions but meetings to organise a petition circumvented most of them. A further motive was that these petitions aimed to test Westminster opinion: each was presented to a new parliament (following a general election). What the movement's strategy should be was a vexed question: but that petitioning was the prerequisite was never contested. It lay at the heart of the relationship between political contention, collective action and the notions of citizenship that Chartism sought to advance.

The third issue addressed by this paper is how petitioning constructed Chartism. In every contributing locality canvassing was a major intervention in political life. The subscriptional community created by its petitions were "the people", a term that clearly included not only men but also women and children. This was a different and wider meaning of the term "the people" from that used by Chartism's opponents and it was a profound departure. Petitioning shaped, articulated and mobilized the politics of a nascent working class, "banded together in one solemn and holy league" but excluded from economic and political power. These were canvassed petitions, not laid down to await the signatures of the already converted. Chartism stood on the cusp of a largely oral popular political culture and the predominantly written culture that emerged during the Victorian period. Canvassing signatures was therefore a multi-layered action, about much more than getting names on a page.

What Did Chartism Petition For?: Mass Petitions in the British Movement for Democracy

In many ways the successor to early nineteenth-century radicalism (see Author 4), the Chartist movement in Britain was a mass, largely working-class movement that campaigned for democratic reform in the 1830s and 1840s. It is a universal axiom that “Chartism was built around the strategy of mass petitioning, encapsulated in the three great petitions of 1839, 1842 and 1848” (Saunders 2007: 464). The movement’s history has effectively been narrated around them and its collapse regularly linked to the humiliations surrounding the third of them. The Chartist mode of mass petitioning was unique, aiming to channel millions of signatures into a singular petition, rather produce a flood of petitions as with other campaigns such as anti-slavery. Yet with a few exceptions, scholars, while understandably impressed by the numbers of signatories (3.3 million signed the 1842 petition), have paid scant attention to the content, language or deeper purposes of these documents (Agnés 2013; Pickering 2001). The core demands of Chartism were the six points of *The People’s Charter* (1838), the document that gave the movement its name. These points were universal male suffrage, equal electoral districts, annual parliamentary elections, the abolition of the property qualification for MPs, payment of MPs and the secret ballot. The three Chartist petitions are strongly contrasting exercises in political argument. The 1839 text was hardly the movement’s own, having been inherited from the Birmingham Political Union (B.P.U.), and the demand for equal-sized constituencies was conspicuously absent. The 1842 petition ranged so widely in its demands that the six points constituted hardly a third of the demands it made. Then, in 1848 a relatively short document, centered on an assertion that the denial of universal

male suffrage enforced “servility and degradation”, ended not with a plea for the six points but a request for Chartist leaders to be heard at the bar of the Commons.

The petition texts are documents of some substance. Histories of Chartism extrapolate evidence from pamphlets, journalism, speeches and addresses issued by local collectivities such as the Female Political Union of Newcastle upon Tyne, the Radical Association of Colne, or the Bolton Working Men’s Association (for addresses from these groups see those reprinted in Thompson 1971). However, at very few points in the movement’s history did all its supporters cohere around a common statement of policy and aims. The obvious exception to this generalization - *The People’s Charter*, as published in 1838, with its well-rehearsed six points - is something of a paradox. Those taking the trouble to read it are frequently disappointed. The introduction is little more than 2,200 words long – shorter than the text of the 1842 National Petition. What then follows, three-quarters of the total length, takes the form of a draft parliamentary statute. This was a careful calculation: *The People’s Charter* was intended to complete the work which, it was believed, Magna Carta had begun (Chase 2007: 8)

This article explores how the petitions’ language reflected the evolving Chartist movement; and it seeks to answer the question, what did the Chartists petition for? The phrasing is deliberately ambiguous: the text of these petitions clearly merits close reading; but equally, what did the Chartists petition for? Why did they bother? It makes sense to consider this question first. It is doubtful that any Chartist expected petitioning alone would succeed. There was no lack of commitment to petitioning in 1839, for example, but rejection was widely predicted. A central premiss of Chartism was that Parliament, exclusively comprising the propertied, enacted laws solely in the interests of its members and those who voted for them. This

view was deep-rooted long before the first petition was even presented. “They thought from their hearts, that it was no use petitioning any more”, a speaker declared at the meeting at which supporters in Loughborough formally adopted the National Petition (Leicestershire Mercury, 10 November 1838). “Exclusive legislation”, a south London Chartist argued, had reduced the people “to misery and distress ... [he] implored them not to have too much faith in the present parliament ... their petition might not be received” (Operative, 27 January 1839). “Hold yourselves prepared for the rejection”, a bobbin-maker advised “the working classes of Aberdeen”, and be prepared to petition “again with double the number of signatures” (*John O’Groats Journal*, 7 September 1838). A Preston handloom weaver declared that “[n]one of the industrious classes, who signed the petition ever thought for one moment that the legislature would grant the Charter. The people expected nothing at the hands of the government” (Charter, 17 February 1839). The motion to hear delegates from the Chartist National Convention speak to the first petition at the bar of the House of Commons, “was of course negatived”, observed the Tyneside radical paper, *Northern Liberator*, “[votes] for 46, against, 235 ... this was to be expected; and our only wonder is that, in such a house, forty-six members should be found voting as the forty-six voted ... they will pass in the history of their country for honest men - and that, as times go, is something!” (*Northern Liberator*, 20 July 1839).

Why, then, were the Chartists such indefatigable petitioners? They did so firstly out of the necessity - but also a desire - to comply with constitutional and legal propriety: extra-parliamentary agitations were hedged round by legal restrictions. As Edmund Burke observed in 1775, petitions were “the only peaceable and constitutional mode of commencing any procedure for the redress of public grievances. The presenting of a Petition was like bringing an Action; the beginning

only, not the whole of the suit” (Bradley 1986: 17). Chartists needed to bring the action: each national petition was intended to test out the mood of a newly assembled Parliament (following general elections in 1837, 1841 and 1847). On all three occasions what should happen after rejection was a vexed question within the movement: but that the petitioning was the essential prerequisite was never contested. Feargus O’Connor, the most widely and passionately acclaimed Chartist leader, encapsulated the argument in a speech to the 1839 National Convention:

They were determined by moral force if they could, but at all events, to have universal suffrage ... If the people expected their petition, in consequence of its being signed by one, or two, or three, or ten millions, would obtain universal suffrage, they were mistaken ... there must be martyrs before universal suffrage would be attained ... They would present such a phalanx as would compel those who would refuse the charter to their petitions to grant it to something else (loud cheers). The people should recollect that a million of petitions would not dislodge a single troop of dragoons (Charter, 24 March 1839).

More cautiously, the Sheffield poet and edge-tool grinder Edwin Gill, moved the adoption of a memorial (or petition) to the Queen in 1842, calling on her to dissolve Parliament. He was convinced “that in all probability the fate of this remonstrance would be that of the national petition. (Hear.)”. But not only was the remonstrance the only peaceful and constitutional medium open to them, “its adoption would tend to open the eyes of the people more and more to the villainy of their rulers” (Northern Star [NS], 25 June 1842; see also Sanders 2009: 153, 160, 175, 178, 195, 200).

Petitioning and memorializing were therefore iterative educational processes central to building political awareness. They were also of unimpeachable legality, a

“constitutional ... reason for bringing the people together”, William Hill (editor of the movement’s principal newspaper Northern Star) pointed out, “a right which, as Britons, we ought to prize. It legalizes our meetings, and gives assurances of safety in our attempts to spread our principles” (NS, 19 October 1839, 13 February 1841; see also Pickering 2001: 375). The 1842 petition was written “not in the language of humility, but in the language of men awaking from a long night of slavery ... “the language of nature to demand your rights”, Henry Vincent told the meeting convened in Leicester to adopt it; but he still emphasized that petition was “the most constitutional manner of asking for their rights, and at the same time being the means of ascertaining the feelings of the people” (Leicestershire Mercury, 13 November 1841). Petitioning was also a well-established radical strategy: in a very real sense there was nothing exceptional about Chartism’s use of petitioning, except the scale of its operations. Even here, as is shown elsewhere in this collection, there was a clear precedent in the 1817 petitions for parliamentary reform (Author 4; Agn s 2013: 65)

Negative reactions to petitioning were likewise all-too familiar. As *The Political House that Jack Built*, the celebrated Hone-Cruikshank satire mordantly observed:

THESE ARE THE PEOPLE all tatter’d and torn
Who curse the day wherein they were born,
On account of Taxation too great to be borne,
And pray for relief, from night to morn:
Who, in vain, Petition in every form,
Who, peaceably Meeting to ask for Reform,
Were sabred by Yeomanry Cavalry. (Hone and Cruikshank 1819)

Moral suasion, general strike, conspiratorial violence, open revolt and sheer pressure of numbers all featured in the various scenarios for which Chartists argued after

petitioning failed. But every strategy depended on the mobilization of mass support and here the Petitions were indispensable. Until the National Charter Association (N.C.A.) was established in the autumn of 1840, Chartism had no over-arching organizational structure beyond that which managed the first Petition and then stood down in September 1839 (Chase 2007: 57-87, 95-106). Petitioning was instrumental and integral to Chartism's growth. Indeed, the petitions to reverse the sentences, first of death and then of transportation for life, passed on John Frost, Zephaniah Williams and William Jones (the leaders of the South Wales Chartist Rising of November 1839) were a powerful factor in holding the movement together during 1840. They consolidated and extended the movement's network of supporters so successfully that – as we shall see – more people signed the principal petition supporting the three men in 1840-41 than had signed the 1839 National Petition.

The organization and practice of Chartist petitioning

Chartist petitions were typically canvassed petitions: they were not “laid down” to await the signatures of the converted as were, for example, the petitions of the anti-slavery movement. “There were no tables exhibited. There were no paid agents employed to canvass the town”, explained a leading member of the B.P.U., relating how signatures were collected in Birmingham, “the members of the Union took the sheets ... was not this organisation such as never before existed?” (Birmingham Journal, 25 August 1838). The only conspicuous exception to this pattern was London. To the alarm of the Chartist Convention, as late even as three weeks before the 1839 petition was collated ready for presentation, it was only available to sign at a select – and poorly advertised – number of locations (NS, 20 April 1839).

Chartism stood on the cusp of a largely oral popular political culture and the predominantly written culture that emerged in the Victorian period. Canvassing

signatures was therefore a multi-layered action and about more than getting names on a page. Petitions “parade Chartism in open day”, observed O’Connor, “and bring us under the eye of the heretofore blind” (Chartist Circular, 14 May 1842; NS, 7 May 1842). Canvassing was a major intervention in the political life of every contributing locality. There were almost a thousand such localities in 1839 (four times as many as the local associations of the rival middle-class Anti-Corn Law League) (Pickering and Tyrrell 2000: 44-6). Even small parishes would be divided into districts, with canvassers allocated to each. The organization of the first National Petition effectively launched Chartism in many localities and led to the permanent establishment of formal local Chartist organization. Thus at Kidderminster a “provisional committee” was appointed by a small public meeting to organize a “preliminary meeting of the Working Classes”: there the petition text was solemnly read aloud and a resolution adopted to organize a general meeting where it would be formally adopted. This meeting was duly held, initiating the process of collecting signatures. A fortnight later 150 petitioners met and constituted themselves as the Kidderminster Working Men’s Association. Each attendee pledged to collect further signatures and 2,500 were obtained over the next eight weeks (Worcestershire Chronicle, 23, 30 August, 13 September, 13 December 1838).

Reports from localities indicate that canvassers generally visited homes and workplaces rather than accosting people in the street. In Tavistock, west Devon, members of the local Working Men’s Association walked the whole town with petition sheets and subscription lists, “missing scarcely a door”. They collected 1,366 signatures, about 22% of the borough’s population and a figure far in excess of the number of parliamentary electors in the borough (247 in 1832). “Many professed liberal men”, reported the Chartists’ secretary, “found their right hands so stiff they

could not write their own name”.¹ Chartists at Ceres in Fife, Scotland, claimed to have obtained 2,000 signatures, with only 45 adult parishioners refusing to sign (Fife Herald, 14 June 1838). The 1842 National Petition was intended to have a similar galvanizing impact on the movement. “Now then! is the time for work!!”, the Northern Star enthused (NS, 16 October 1841). And work Chartists did. The Kent dockyard town of Sheerness, for example, had been untouched by Chartism in 1839. In 1842 it yielded 800 signatures: over four consecutive evenings after they had finished work, two Chartists exhaustively canvassed the inhabitants, driving the “real truth of Chartism into their heads” (NS, 13 November 1841).

Chartist petitioning and the people

A canvassed, as opposed to a laid-down, petition made a particular rhetorical claim for legitimacy. Chartist discourse constructed a vision of the people as those excluded from economic and political power by the mutually reinforcing actions of an inequitable economic system and a venal parliament. The Kilmarnock Chartist leader Hugh Craig spoke of “the petition of the industrious classes – the long-oppressed, the long-enduring, but now indignant, working millions of the empire” in 1839 (Leeds Times, 11 May 1839). The subscriptional community created by the movement’s petitions, especially in 1842 and 1848, were “the people”, a term that explicitly included both men and women and even children. It was fundamentally different and more inclusive than the same term as used by the opponents of Chartism as well as many of its middle-class supporters (Thompson 1996: 118-32). Parliament was mindful of this distinctiveness but in 1842, at least, was untroubled by it. “Nobody pretended, that all the names were those of grown men”, the Radical MP for Westminster John Temple candidly informed the House, “many were

avowedly those of women, and others were the names of young men who had not yet reached the age of twenty-one” (Hansard 3 May 1842: 33).

The inclusion of women and, especially, children was a significant departure from earlier working-class collective action. The participation of children under any circumstances broke new ground. Evidence survives for the deliberate inclusion of children’s names in earlier petitions on only two occasions. Neither, especially the second, constitutes any kind of precedent for Chartist practice. Soon after the passing of the Cotton Arbitration Act (1800), and in response to news that Stockport employers had petitioned for its repeal, four-thousand Bolton weavers allegedly signed a counter-petition in two days. Examined by a parliamentary committee, the Constable of Bolton (himself a former weaver) did not deny an allegation that "they went round and took Children from different Houses and signed their Names" (Select Committee on Petitions 1803: 88). Secondly, in 1832 it was alleged that silk mill owners in East Anglia forced children whom they employed to sign with crosses a petition opposing factory reform (Select Committee on Bill for the Regulation of Factories 1832: 537).²

Female petitioning is more-widely documented, but as Richardson (2013: 115) has emphasised, “it was not accepted unequivocally that women had a right to petition on their own behalf” Only “a handful of women” were among the 45,000 who signed the London petition of the Protestant Association in 1780 (Knights 2012: 53). At least one labour organisation set its face against women signatories: when the midlands framework knitters petitioned Parliament in 1812 for their trade to be closely regulated, their leaders issued an unambiguous instruction: “All the Males in the Trade may sign but no Women” (Chase 2012: 35). However, the popular defence of Queen Caroline in 1820, against the government’s moves to obtain a divorce for

husband, George III, saw a sea-change in female political participation (Chase 2013: 173-83, 211-2). From the 1830s female petitioning was increasingly commonplace (Richardson 2013: 115-26). Women, however, primarily petitioned in support of religious and moral causes, “issues [that] could be argued to be everyone’s business” (Innes 2013: 139). The abolition of slavery was the main driver here (Midgley 1992: 23-4, 62-3) and female participation in other fields was often minimal. Women signatories, for example, were conspicuously absent from the 871 petitions sent to Parliament in a campaign around public health in 1847-48, 103 of which were clearly working-class in origin (Hanley 2002: 398).

Chartism’s explicit inclusion of children, and of women as petitioners for political rights, was therefore a development of considerable significance. In 1839 O’Connor was clear in emphasizing the totemic status of the petition: “Go on, good men! Go on, virtuous women! Go on little children! We are engaged in the cause of justice, which is the cause of God. Sign the Petition. It is the last, the very last ... silence them, give it to them: let every man, woman and child sign the Petition”.³ The extent of children’s signatures is impossible to quantify. Some localities set a threshold - for example 10 years of age at Newburgh, Fifeshire, and 18 in the West Riding of Yorkshire village of Almondbury, the latter used because this was the age at which males became liable for militia service. The editor of the *Ten Hours’ Advocate* advised that “all persons, both male and female, above thirteen years of age, are competent to sign” (Fife Herald, 3 June 1841; NS, 8 December 1838; *Ten Hours’ Advocate*, 9 January 1847). Adult female signatories, though, were conspicuous and are broadly quantifiable. “You must all sign it”, the energetic B.P.U. activist Thomas Clutton Salt told a Midlands audience in 1838: “wherever I have been, I have got the women to sign it too. (“We will.”) They are more interested than the men”, he added

(Leicestershire Mercury, 10 November 1838). In 1848 the Northern Star (18 March) took care to clarify that it was legal for women to sign and the House of Commons Select Committee on Public Petitions calculated the proportion of female signatories on this petition to be 8 percent. (It had no incentive to underestimate the figure since it saw women's signatures as discrediting Chartism.) In 1839, where separately reported for individual communities in the Northern Star, women's signatures ranged from 13 to 20 percent (Chase 2007: 359). Some localities exceeded this: for example Falkland, a Fife textiles village, claimed its numbers of female and male signatures exactly matched (Fife Herald, 14 June 1838).

Nor were women just passive signatories. May Pares moved from Scotland to south London in the mid-1830s. She and her blacksmith husband had six children, the youngest of whom was scarcely five when Mary died of cholera in 1849. The Northern Star printed a tribute to this "fond and affectionate mother" and also "noble woman". The newspaper noted that she was one of Greenwich's leading Chartists and "whenever a petition was to be presented she was one of the foremost in obtaining signatures". In 1842 she had collected hundreds and had herself marched in the 50,000-strong demonstration that escorted the petition to Westminster (NS, 1 September 1849).⁴ At Newcastle in 1839, an audience of female Chartists were asked whether, if Parliament rejected the petition "they ready to make a sacred month of it [that is, to support a general strike], and take to the hillside?" They chanted repeatedly, "We will" (NS, 15 June 1839). This was exhilarating imagery: a chosen people gathered in the assurance of divine dispensation. William Benbow's pamphlet *Grand National Holiday* (1832), the earliest published argument for general strike as a political strategy, had quoted Psalm Fifty: "The cattle upon the thousand hills, they are the Lord's, that is the people's, and when the people want them, the guardians

who have kept them so long, will deliver them unto the people”. Benbow became a prominent Chartist and variations on his formulae appear frequently in Chartist discourse, along with the depiction of the people as specially chosen: “those that have made a covenant with me” (Benbow 1832: 14; see also 12). The Tynesider Robert Lowery (who challenged the Whig historian T.B. Macaulay at Edinburgh in the 1841 general election and actually defeated him at the hustings though not the subsequent poll), spoke of taking to the hills and “retiring from labour, like the Roman plebeians of old to the Aventine-hill”. O’Connor used the same trope; if denied their just demands, then the Chartists “would light their torches and repair to the hill-side, and there remain until the prayer of their petition was granted” (Charter, 14 July 1839; Harrison and Hollis 1979: 142; Operative, 28 April 1839).

Signatures of solidarity

Petitioning was a powerful recruitment tool: simple, open, accessible and cheap (Miller 2012: 892). Yet it could nurture a powerful sense of solidarity. The act of signing could be heavy with significance. At Glasgow 20,000 signed the 1839 petition within four days of its formal adoption in the city; at the opposite end of the United Kingdom, when missionaries from the Chartist Convention arrived at Hayle in Cornwall to collect signatures, the queue to sign it lasted until ten at night (Birmingham Journal, 9 June 1838).⁵ Publicizing the names of those who refused to sign also laid the basis for campaigns of exclusive dealing (the targeted withdrawal of custom by Chartists from enfranchised shopkeepers who refused their support) (Scotsman, 16 June 1838).

Further insight into the process of Chartist petitioning can be gleaned from a collection of petitions and memorials in support of Frost, Williams and Jones, accumulated by the Home Office.⁶ The rising that the three men led, focused on

Newport in Monmouthshire in November 1839, was one of the most sensational episodes in Chartism's history. The sentences to death for high treason handed down in January 1840 were robustly contested and their commutation to transportation for life did nothing to dampen this. Over 68,000 more people signed the 1841 parliamentary petition for the Welsh prisoners to be pardoned than had signed the 1839 National Petition itself. Like the three great petitions for the Charter, this 1841 initiative does not survive. However, the Home Office logged 458 localities (in addition to 110 individuals or families) who presented petitions of their own during January 1840, before the national petitioning campaign was launched. These early petitions were apparently also destroyed, but more than sixty others, presented between February 1840 and 1856, survive. In most, though not all, cases the signatures were removed from them before filing; furthermore the standard procedure for memorials was that they were signed solely by the chairman of the meeting that adopted them. Nonetheless, sufficient material survives in this Home Office file to cast significant light on the culture of Chartist memorialization and petitioning.

We have already seen how petitioning was a powerful means of recruitment and this is further underlined by thirty-four localities, petitioning for Frost, Williams and Jones in 1840-1, where there is no record of any earlier Chartist activity. Particular nodes of new activity were evident in Fife (Abdie, East Wemyss, Leslie, Leuchars); western England (Leominster, Nailsworth, Ross-on-Wye) and along the Sussex coast (Seaford; Shoreham; Worthing). The act of petitioning nurtured solidarity at both communal and more specific sub-cultural levels, ranging from the Baptists of Old Basford (Nottinghamshire) to the Catholics of Sunderland; the youths of Dundee to the Prudent Brethren of Freemasons; and numerous trades and female groups.⁷

All the surviving petitions and memorials indicate a close attention to procedural propriety, with regard to both the composition and presentation of the text. Almost invariably, and regardless of date, a stiff formality prevailed, usually conforming to a prescribed formula, especially when legal precedent and due process were being contested and/or the texts were drawn up centrally, for example by the “Exiles Restoration Committee” established by the 1845 Chartist Convention.⁸ Just occasionally a splash of local color creeps in: “we appeal to your Majesty as a Sovereign[,] a Wife and as a Mother”, declared a public meeting assembled on the traditional Chartist meeting site of Camp Field, Manchester.⁹ And Bacup’s Chartists pleaded that “whatever political irregularities” had been committed by the Welsh martyrs, “the demands of justice have now been fully satisfied, and that they now ought to be restored to the bosoms of their afflicted families”.¹⁰

Handwriting, and, less often, spelling, might be erratic, but effort and attention to detail is evident in all these documents if we consider them as material culture. For the 1842 National Petition, the *Northern Star* print works issued the text “on a neat sheet ... for the purpose of being distributed amongst those from whom signatures are asked, that they may know for what they are signing”. Branches were recorded ordering reams of ruled foolscap until “Petition sheets, of good strong paper, ruled in four columns, and holding two hundred names when filled” were produced by the *Star* at two pence a sheet (*NS*, 27 March 1841, 13 and 27 November 1841). For the locally derived Newport petitions, lined paper was acquired or sheets carefully ruled; paragraphs frequently commenced with elaborate capitals; and signatures were marshaled into orderly columns. Very few were presented other than on a single side of paper, even if this required stitching or gumming separate sheets together. While Chartists had few illusions about the fate of

their petitions, then, great pains were taken in the process, practice and rituals of petitioning, which testify to its central importance to the internal culture of the movement.

Who petitioned?

When 156 inhabitants of the contiguous Essex textile villages of Bocking and Braintree petitioned the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, in 1844, Nan Bives was one of twenty-nine who made a mark rather than sign. However, it appears that she originally made a haphazard attempt to sign for herself that was judged to have disfigured the document; so a strip of paper was carefully pasted over her initial effort on which another family member then wrote her name, Nan then making her mark beside it.¹¹ She was one of forty-one women who supported the memorial (28% of those signatories who gave a forename). A close comparison of the text with the signatures ranged across the five columns beneath suggests that the memorial may have been written out by a member of the Alden family (William, Charles, Mary, Hannah and Sarah), handloom silk weavers from Braintree. Only three of the surviving Chartist petitions from localities include their signatories' occupations: from Aberdeen (1846), Keighley (1855) and Oldham (probably of the same date).¹² Aberdeen's included female signatures, albeit only two from fifty-nine. In both the English cases all the signatures were men's (84 in Keighley and 38 in Oldham). Keighley's signatories ranged from foundry men to ministers of religion – seven in all – the most common occupation after grocers, of whom there were eleven. Shopkeepers and dealers slightly dominated the signatories. All Oldham's signatories were shopkeepers or professional men, with the exception of six cotton spinners. This absence of female signatories is consistent with the argument that female participation in radical politics diminished sharply over the mid-Victorian decades, the decline

particularly apparent in Chartism as the movement shifted from a community-based and often “out of doors” agitation to indoor “respectability”, typically subscription-based and more-formally structured (Thompson 1993: 77-102).

The cause of the Newport martyrs consistently attracted the support of middle-class reformers and it cannot be assumed that all the Keighley or Oldham signatories had been active Chartists: Anglican, Wesleyan and Roman Catholic clergy signed in Keighley, and twelve members of Oldham’s town council endorsed its memorial – among them John Platt, the town’s major employer (on Platt see Foster 1974). The Oldham memorial especially is indicative of how later nineteenth-century reform politics coalesced around Liberalism; but so is Keighley’s, signed by Joshua Craven, the chairman of the local Board of Health, “in pursuance of a unanimous resolution of the Board”. Chartist participation in local government, especially at the lower tiers of health and highway boards, however, was not uncommon by the mid-1850s. One of the earliest harbingers of this under-researched aspect of English local government was the success of Chartists in Holbeck (an out-township of Leeds) in capturing the township’s select vestry in 1845. In 1846, convinced that the Newport trials had not been “in consonance with the law of the land”, they sent a memorial to the Prime Minister, also signed by a churchwarden, four poor law overseers and the parish constable (the latter a Tory manufacturer, the only signatory who was not at least a “fellow traveler” of Chartism).¹³

The clear majority of these Newport petitions, however, came from sympathetic trades groups and Chartist localities. Some of the trades were formally organized, such as the London Ladies’ Shoemakers and the Operative Society of Carpenters. Others were looser affiliations such as the weavers of Dublin, the printers of Isleworth (Middlesex) or the journeymen brushmakers of Leeds. Petitions were

also submitted from particular workplaces: that from “Messrs Henderson & Widwell’s Carpet Weavers” of Lasswade (Midlothian), was signed by over a hundred weavers and sent to the Home Secretary with a covering letter from one of them.¹⁴ A significant minority of petitions came from named Chartist organizations: for example the Ipswich and Wootton-under-Edge Working Men’s Associations, Carlisle’s N.C.A. branch, Leith Universal Suffrage Association and Cheltenham Female Union.¹⁵ Some were adopted at meetings organized under direct Chartist auspices, such as that “principally [sic] composed of the operative classes” and held in the Chartist room at Bacup, Lancashire. Most, though, were formally presented as emanating from the inhabitants of each community “in Public Meeting Assembled”.

Though canvassed, even the 1839, 1842 and 1848 National Petitions were typically adopted by a formal meeting in each Chartist locality: the procedure both capitalized on an unimpeachable opportunity for a mass meeting, but also diminished the distance between “constitutional” petitions (presented by local public meetings) and “institutional” ones (organized by central bodies and to which parliamentarians tended to accord less respect) (Miller 2012: 886-7). The need for a second National Petition was mooted at Chartist meetings and in the movement’s press months before the General Election of 1841, and every issue of the *Northern Star* from February 1841 onwards reported and discussed the initiative. Although the text of each national petition was devised centrally, Chartist localities typically debated it before formally resolving to adopt it. As *Northern Star* (13 November 1841) declared of the second Petition, “[i]t has been submitted to your consideration”.

The process by which the Elland Radical Association endorsed the first National Petition is indicative of the seriousness with which Chartist localities approached this task: an open meeting was announced by the local bellman; a

resolution calling for a united effort to end “the present monopoly of law making” was proposed, seconded, speeches made in its support and passed; this process was then repeated with a resolution specifically calling for cooperation with other regions. Only then did a representative of the Birmingham Political Union come to the stand. He concluded a ninety-minute speech by reading the petition text in full (“shouts and clapping of hands ... lasted for several minutes”). A resolution, once again formally proposed and seconded, was then passed unanimously to adopt the petition (NS 16 June 1838).

The Chartist petitions as texts

What, then, did the three great petitions for the People’s Charter ask for? Most surprisingly, perhaps, none straightforwardly asked for the Charter. Technically the 1839 petition is not a petition at all. It offers no prayer but instead catalogues a series of assertions followed by a list of demands – three of them headed DEMAND in block capitals. This was deliberate and not a cavalier disregard of procedural propriety. The Council of the B.P.U., which drew up the text, was emphatic that demand was the language of the 1688 Declaration of Rights (“the petition of rights” as the B.P.U.’s chairman, Thomas Attwood, insisted on calling it) (NS, 11 August 1838).

Given what has already been said, it will be no surprise that the 1839 petition was couched in highly Biblical language (text reprinted in Gammage 1854: 96-98). “We, your petitioners, dwell in a land whose merchants are noted for enterprise, whose manufacturers are very skilful, and whose workmen are proverbial for their industry”, it commences. “The land itself is goodly, the soil rich ... For three and twenty years we have enjoyed a profound peace”. Why then were the petitioners mired in poverty? “We have searched diligently in order to find out the causes of a

distress so sore”, the petition continues, directly echoing Deuteronomy (17:4) where the diligent enquirer discovers “that such abomination is wrought in Israel”. The Biblical commonplace that Israel in exile was a people “sore distressed” is also invoked in this passage, which is the fulcrum on which the argument of the petition turns. “We can discover none [no causes] in nature, or in Providence. Heaven has dealt graciously by the people; but the foolishness of our rulers has made the goodness of God of none effect.”

As one would also expect, the 1832 Reform Act, which passed a limited franchise, was the target of considerable opprobrium: here again the language is Biblical even where it did not directly reference a particular text:

It was the fond expectation of the people that a remedy for the greater part, if not for the whole, of their grievances, would be found in the Reform Act ...

They have been bitterly and basely deceived. The fruit which looked so fair to the eye has turned to dust and ashes when gathered.

The phrase “dust and ashes” potentially evokes several scriptural references, but co-located with fruit directly references the apples of Sodom, which dissolved into ashes and smoke when plucked. The 1839 petition, in short, does not pull its punches in criticizing those it depicts as having “neglected, or insolently and tyrannously trampled upon” the interests of the people. “If by God’s help and all lawful and constitutional appliances, an end can be put to it, we are fully resolved that it shall speedily come to an end.”

The 1842 petition sharply contrasted to what had gone before (text from Hansard 2 May 1842: 1376-81). The second national petition exhibited none of the visceral religiosity of the first. God is referenced only once, and that in a prayer for the disestablishment of the Anglican Church of England and for total freedom of

worship. Though the 1839 text was discursive, its demands were confined to five of the Charter's six points. (The call for equal electoral districts was inconsistently advocated because of its implications for new smaller boroughs such as Blackburn or Whitby, and the prospect of a dramatic increase in Irish constituencies.) In 1842 the Chartists petitioned for all six points, plus freedom of political expression and assembly, a reduction in the hours of factory labor, disestablishment and the repeal of the union between Britain and Ireland and against starvation wages, the national debt, the New Poor Law, a standing army, the 1839 Constabularies Act, the civil list and class bias in the administration of justice. The petitioners also "respectfully mention[ed] ... monopolies of the suffrage, of paper money, of machinery, of land, of the public press, of religious privileges, of the means of travelling and transit, and a host of other evils too numerous to mention, all arising from class legislation."

Crucially the 1842 text referenced taxation as not merely excessive but contrary to the 1689 Bill of Rights. In language echoing the rhetoric of American independence, the petition declared that "Where representation is denied, taxation ought to be resisted". This had conspicuously not been done in 1839; indicative perhaps of its origins in the more cautious counsels of the middle-class dominated B.P.U. Although both petitions took aim at a corrupt and venal political establishment, where 1839 had invoked religious authority to present its case of a people sore-oppressed, 1842 deployed statistical data to illustrate inequalities in the electoral system, wage rates and the burden of taxation. Throughout it drew upon secular natural rights theory to argue that people existed in "degrading slavery". Popular sovereignty was repeatedly asserted: "Government originated from, was designed to protect the freedom and promote the happiness of ... the whole people"; "the only authority on which any body ... can make laws and govern society, is

delegation from the people”; “Government which fails to effect the[se] purposes ... is unconstitutional, tyrannical, and ought to be amended or resisted”.

The 1842 text was framed as a series of prayers and therefore met the technical requirements of a petition. However, it was effectively a manifesto indicating the policies that a Parliament elected on the basis of the People’s Charter would enact. Receiving it, the House of Commons was itself confused, with several members admitting uncertainty about whether they were being asked to enact legislation that would implement what the Chartists were demanding, or simply voting on a motion that a delegation from the Chartist Convention be allowed to plead its case at the bar of the House. The text is the fullest and most considered statement of Chartism’s political principles, and both wider ranging and more readable than *The People’s Charter* itself. Its 3.3 million subscribing signatories (around a third of the adult population) means that it remains the largest single paper-based petition ever presented to the British Parliament. Only one petition in the modern digital era (calling for a second referendum on withdrawal from the European Union – 4,150,260 signatures) has exceeded the signatures gathered in 1842, and pro rata the population of the United Kingdom at the time of presentation to Parliament, the second Chartist National Petition seems unlikely ever to be overtaken.

In 1848 the shortest of the three National Petitions was tightly focused on the six points and explicitly concluded with no more than a plea for the Commons to consider the case that would be put at the bar of the House by a delegation of Chartist leaders (text from *York Herald*, 15 April 1848). Unlike its predecessors, social and economic distress were not referenced at all, beyond contrasting “the poor elector” with “the great, coercive, and corrupted power possessed by wealth and station”. The philosophical basis for universal male suffrage is more briefly asserted, in references

to “the laws of nature and of God” and “the eternal rights of man”, and in echoes of both the American and French revolutionary declarations:

Your petitioners declare, that the great end of all governmental institutions should be the protection of life, the security of property, the promotion of education and morality, and the diffusion of happiness among all classes.

However, the 1848 petition was in no sense conciliatory and it was not constructed with a view to ensuring that Parliament would grant its prayer:

Your petitioners have never yet heard a valid reason urged for maintaining the present representative system ... the argument pleaded against the admission of the people to the immunities which the social contract should guarantee, are based upon class selfishness prejudices, and contracted [stunted or restricted] views of humanity (York Herald, 15 April 1848).

The 1842 and 1848 petitions shared a vocabulary of class (for example “class selfishness”, “class legislation”) – a phenomenon conspicuously absent in the 1839 text wherein the definition of the people includes “the master” whose “capital ... must no longer be deprived of its due reward”. By contrast the vocabulary choices of 1842 and 1848 depict the people as both wage earners and victims of monopoly. Where the 1839 text looked beyond a corrupt political establishment it did so to criticize little else than taxation. The range of targets in 1842 was far wider; that in 1848 ostensibly much narrower, but the phrase “class selfishness” signified a whole system that elsewhere in the text is summarized simply as “servility and degradation” and “the oppressiveness” and “stigma of political inferiority”. There is no mention of taxation anywhere in the 1848 petition, which ends almost on a note of bathos with the comment that if the Commons doubted “the justice of our demands, your petitioners humbly entreat to be heard at the bar of your honourable house by counsel or agents

in support of those claims". A similar entreaty had been made in 1842, but considerably more polemically: representatives of the petitioners would "unfold a tale of wrong and suffering - of intolerable injustice - which will create utter astonishment in the minds of all benevolent and good men". Furthermore in 1842 this point was subordinate to the concluding prayer that parliament "immediately, without alteration, deduction, or addition, pass into a law the document entitled 'The People's Charter'". In 1848 the prayer that a delegation be permitted to make its case at the bar of the House was the conclusion.

Why did the content and language of these three documents vary so markedly? Since the early 1980s, it has been almost a scholarly commonplace that the movement was the last hurrah of eighteenth-century "old corruption" political tropes rather than reflecting a new language of class rooted in the social and economic change associated with the Industrial Revolution. Support for this interpretation can be found in 1839 text but much less so in the second and third petitions. An over-concentration, especially in the classic statement of this interpretation, on the language of Chartism in the formative months of May 1838 to the summer of 1839, obscures the rapidity with which Chartism evolved (Stedman Jones 1983). The 1839 text was the work of the B.P.U., and its apocalyptic language cloaked an essentially middle-class critique of taxation and the continued dominance after 1832 of Westminster by the landed interest. The 1842 text, by contrast, was the work of Robert Kemp Philp and Peter McDouall (NS, 28 May 1842, 2 December 1848; "Annals of Progress", People's Journal, 2 January 1846).¹⁶ "It is the production not of mere theorists", a Northern Star editorial (13 November 1841) observed, "and its every line bears the stamp of equity and truth". It is true that the authors were middle-class: Philp was the son of a Cornish draper and had owned a printing, publishing and bookselling business;

McDouall held a diploma in surgery from Edinburgh and practiced medicine in Lancashire (Charter, 7 April 1839). However, both men had suffered in the Chartist cause and both were members of the executive of the N.C.A., a body elected democratically by the members of each Chartist locality. McDouall represented Ashton-under-Lyne where he prominently advocated the use of strike action (the Sacred Month) to help secure the Charter. He had been jailed for a year (1839-40) following the Birmingham Bull Ring riots (Chase 2007: *passim*). Philp had avoided jail but only narrowly: in 1840 he had been found guilty of seditious libel, but discharged on sureties, for selling the Chartist *Western Vindicator*; prosecuted for selling newspapers on a Sunday, opting to pay a fine to avoid being sentenced to the pillory; and he had been the first person to address a publically advertised Chartist meeting in Newport after the 1839 rising, for which he was arrested (Chase 2018).

It is uncertain who wrote the 1848 text, but its content indicates the N.C.A.'s desire to draw back from its earlier tactic of detailing the legislative ends to which achieving the Charter was to be the means. Its context was not the year of revolution 1848 but very precisely the general election of July and August the year before, when the Association's central electoral and registration committee had managed a concerted program of Chartist intervention at the polls, officially endorsing Chartist or advanced Liberal candidates in 22 constituencies, 10 of whom were actually elected. The decision to test the new Parliament was taken immediately and petition sheets were circulated from late August 1847, before even the financial crisis that autumn that did much to revivify popular support for Chartism. The movement's leadership intended that this third National Petition would be the biggest yet; but ironically the text placed before the country packed neither the rhetorical punch of 1839, nor the carefully articulated weight of the grievances enumerated in 1842. This

is not, of course, to claim that the language and content of the third petition is the reason why Chartism spiraled into decline soon after its presentation to Parliament. It is, though, a factor that can contribute to a better understanding of the movement's trajectory during and after 1848, for the tighter focus of the demands made in that year's petition were not balanced by any increase in the capacity to get Chartism's message across. Furthermore, the decision by the National Convention, energized by revolutionary events elsewhere in Europe, to bring forward the petition's presentation by over a month, severely curtailed the time in which to collect signatures while those same revolutionary events made the government determined to close down all opportunities for mass demonstrations accompanying the petition's presentation to Parliament (Chase 2007: 298).

This was a serious challenge to Chartism's capacity to shake-off the inevitable rejection of its petition by Parliament. The visual and moral theatre of the petitioning process was a highly effective means of building support for Chartism. We have already seen this in the practices of signature collection, but it is most obvious in the manner in which the petitions were finally presented. By some distance, the second National Petition impressed most. On 12 April 1842 the six hundredweight (305kg) of paper was carried by relays of building workers through London's streets accompanied by an elaborate procession. Arriving outside the Commons the gigantic roll into which the petition was formed proved too large to fit through doors to the chamber. After attempts to dismantle the doorframe failed, the petition had to be disassembled and the sheets heaped onto the floor of the House where it towered above the clerks' table on which, theoretically, it was supposed to be laid (Chase 2007: 205-6). Although, as predicted, the Commons rebuffed it (which was taken by the Northern Star as "practical proof of the necessity of a radical change in our

representative system”) the presentation of 1842 petition was a deeply satisfying piece of political theatre (NS, 15 May 1842). Thomas Slingsby Duncombe, the ultra-radical MP who presented it, was able to wring a special concession from his fellow MPs and the Speaker, to initiate a debate that breached House of Commons’ procedure.

The sheer bulk of the petition before parliamentarians was extraordinary and seen as meriting an extraordinary reception. This in itself was a victory for the Chartist movement. “Look at this petition”, Bolton’s Radical MP, Sir John Bowring declared, “it is not an ordinary one – it is unexampled in importance – it contains a greater number of signatures than any petition ever before presented”. Even the Whig leader Lord John Russell, though expressing “abhorrence of the doctrines set forth in the petition”, emphasized its importance, “the great number of signatures attached”, and felt duty bound to express his “respect for the petitioners” (Hansard 3 May 1842: 35, 70).

The presentation of the 1842 petition was carefully stage-managed to avoid a disappointment similar to 1839. Then, a combination of the “Bedchamber Crisis” (which saw the Whig government briefly resign and the Conservatives refuse to replace it) and Parliament’s Whitsun recess had meant that the National Petition was ceremoniously taken not to Westminster but to the home of the radical MP John Fielden. It had to be entrusted to Fielden’s care and a further five weeks elapsed before it was presented to Parliament, where it was greeted by MPs’ laughter. A further month passed before the House of Commons debated it (Chase 2007: 73, 79, 84). The 1841 national petition for Frost, Williams and Jones to be pardoned was effectively a dry run for the following year. With pleasing symbolism, stonemasons employed in building the new Houses of Parliament (ravaged by fire in 1834) had carried that document to the Commons’ temporary chamber:

the fustian jackets moved up the matted stairs, and along the entrance, through a line of strangers and Members of Parliament. In the lobby the usual order was upset and a great crowd besieged the door of the house itself, the great petition seeming like the head of a battering ram against the green baize doorway ... the mass being lowered and turned on its side, it was rolled on to the floor of the house like a mighty snowball, bearing with it the good wishes of all around, and 1,300,000 people's blessings. The doors closed, order was restored, and the fustian jackets were ushered into the gallery (*McDouall's Chartist and Republican Journal*, 25 May 1841).

Compared to all that had gone before, the third National Petition was decidedly an anticlimax. The famous Kennington Common rally of 10 April 1848 that accompanied its presentation was intended to be the most visually compelling demonstration of the aims and character of Chartism. A sub-committee of the 1848 National Convention was appointed to manage the event and a carriage to carry it specially built from timber felled on one of the Chartist Land Plan's estates. This was in turn embellished with the slogans "The Charter and the Six Points"; "No Surrender"; "Liberty is Worth Living For and Worth Dying For"; "The Voice of the People is the Voice of God"; "Who Would be A Slave that Could be Free?"; "No Vote, No Muskets" (a reference to compulsory Militia service) and "Onward we Conquer, Backward we Fall" (Chase 2007: 302). However, at the insistence of the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, the Petition was prosaically conveyed from Kennington Common across the River Thames in a procession of hansom cabs, accompanied not by the massed ranks of the demonstrators but merely a delegation of Convention members. It was a demoralizing spectacle, scarcely less so than the controversy that followed about the signatories attached to the petition itself, with

allegations of dubious signatures, namesakes and pseudonyms being used to inflate the number of names. Both wounded Chartism: its claims to legitimacy depended on adhering to constitutional propriety, while it derived a deeper moral authority from mobilizing - and no less crucially being seen to mobilize - mass support. As Saunders (2008: 478) observes, the petition “seems to have disappeared without trace”.

The extent of the third petition’s deficiencies were almost certainly exaggerated, both at the time and subsequently at the hands of historians (Pickering 2001: 376, 383-6). Furthermore, the events of 10 April 1848 did not themselves initiate the collapse of Chartism. Nonetheless, the longer-term impact of the episode was a powerful contributing factor in the decline of Chartism. The following year, O’Connor persuaded the movement (reeling from the revelations of revolutionary conspiracy among its ranks during the summer of 1848) to reassert its constitutional claims through renewed petitioning: “you cannot be guilty of a greater folly than that of protesting against petitioning”, he asserted. He initiated a new tactic (for Chartism anyway) of deluging parliament with a welter of local petitions rather than one monster one (NS, 18, 25 November 1848). However, only nineteen localities responded with Chartist petitions in July 1849, and between them they gathered merely 53,816 signatures. When the same tactic was repeated in 1852 the number of petitions was no more than twenty and their aggregated signatures (11,834) barely a fifth of the disappointing muster in 1849 (NS, 7 July 1849; Companion 1849: 224; Companion 1852: 232; Gammage 1854: 386-87, 390-94; see also Chase 2007: 332, 339-40). Mass petitioning had come to define Chartism and clearly there was little appetite to reduce it to a loose federation of petitioning associations. Without the focus of any national campaign many localities slid into desuetude. In 1840-41 petitioning for Frost, Williams and Jones to be pardoned had provided just such a

campaign. During the mid-1840s the hiatus had been filled by the Chartist Land Plan. However, the latter was beset by controversy after 1848, while the movement's failure to regroup around a robust defense of those transported for their activities in 1848 contrasted sharply with the Chartists' mood after the Newport rising.

Although Chartism endured (its final national convention was held as late as 1858) the third Chartist National Petition therefore marked a point of closure, after which Chartism is best characterized as a political pressure group rather than a mass movement; but up until that point petitioning lay at the heart of its ethos and practice. The Chartists were not, as has been claimed, unenthusiastic supplicants for whom petitioning had "little inherent appeal" (Epstein 1994: 18). While it is true that petitioning for redress of grievances was a prerequisite of constitutional propriety, it was seized upon by Chartist organizers at all levels as an effective means of building support for the movement. It proved integral to Chartism's growth, bridging divides of gender, age and occupational status. The very fact of parliamentary hostility to the National Petitions nurtured popular solidarity and was integral to the concept of an excluded people that lay at the movement's heart. Buoyed up both by a realization that they were participating in a process of constitutional significance (the niceties of which were carefully observed) and by a strong sense of political theatre, the Chartists petitioned for the famous six points but also for something deeper. A recent analysis of e-petitioning draws a strong distinction between protest petitions (expressing momentary dissatisfaction, often rapidly accumulating support but of little enduring significance) and substantive petitions (aimed primarily at achieving specific change[s] and signed by petitioners prompted by deeply held convictions and/or direct personal experience) (Leston-Bandeira 2017). The massive petition, mentioned earlier, for a second referendum on UK withdrawal from the European Union is the

most obvious example of a protest petition; re-prioritization of medical research, and for or against field sports, have been the subjects of recent substantive petitions. This is an apt characterization of petitioning in a digital age, where the act of signing is highly individualized and even remote from any locus of political activism. Doubtless there were many who signed the 1839, 1842 and 1848 petitions as an act of momentary protest and who were involved but slightly, if at all, in the broader life of the Chartist movement. However each of the Chartist petitions constituted both a protest and a substantive arguments for political change. Petitioning was both the means and an end of popular politicization and the procedures by which signatures were gathered, collated and presented gave voice and substance to a shared experience of economic, social and political marginalization.

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¹ British Library, Add. MSS 34245A, fos. 24, 102, 320, 323.

² My thanks to Jenni Whitaker for this reference.

³ British Library, Add. MSS, 34245A, fo. 41; NS 23 February 1839 (emphasis in the original).

⁴ NS, 1 September 1849 gives her name as Paris, but she and her family are listed as Pares in the 1841 census.

⁵ British Library, Add. MSS. 34245A, fol. 148 – letter from Robert Lowery and Abram Duncan to the General Convention, 22 March 1839.

⁶ The National Archives, HO/18/21/01, parts 1-3, Home Office Criminal Petitions, Series 2. I am grateful to Les James and Sarah Richards for drawing this collection to my attention.

⁷ HO/18/21/01, part 3, ‘List of Petitions presented on behalf of John Frost and Others’, February 1840.

⁸ HO/18/21/01, part 3, Exiles’ Restoration Committee printed circular.

⁹ HO/18/21/01, part 1, 24 May 1852.

¹⁰ HO/18/21/01, part 3, 18 November 1844

¹¹ HO/18/21/01, part 2, November 1844.

¹² HO/18/21/01, part 2, March 1846 (Aberdeen); HO/18/21/01, part 1, 22 December 1855 (Keighley) and n.d. [12 November 1855?], (Oldham).

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