

# RADICALISM, LOYALISM AND THE 'REIGN OF TERROR' IN BATH, 1792-1804

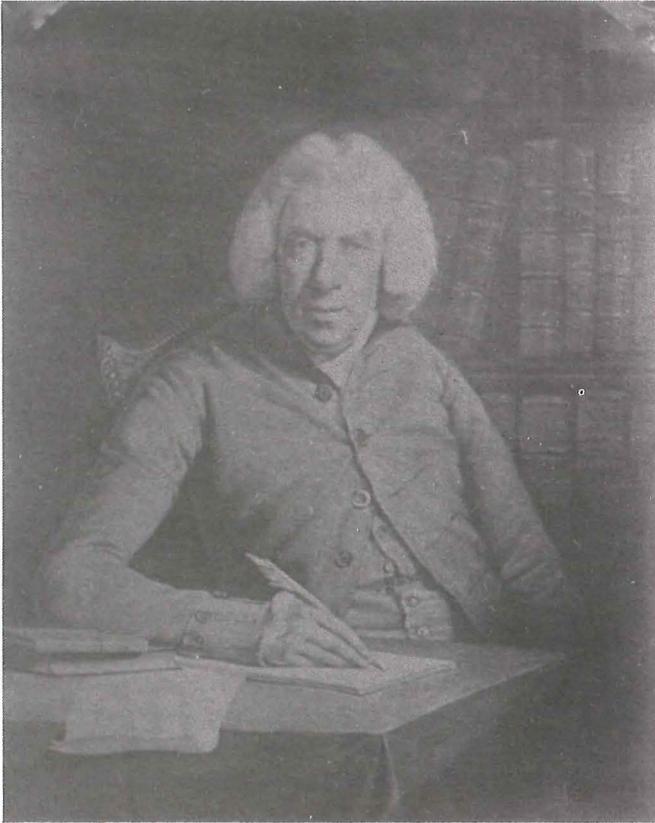
Steve Poole

Here's to Rex, Lex and Pontifex,  
A toast no Loyal heart rejects,  
The king in safety all protects,  
The church to future bliss directs,  
May knaves who plot the State to vex  
Find law provides for all their necks  
(Henry Harington MD, mayor of Bath 1793-4)<sup>1</sup>

On 15 August 1794 two officers hurried from the Guildhall into the Market Place under orders from the mayor of Bath, Dr Henry Harington. There they arrested a journeyman tailor named Benjamin Bull and frogmarched him to his family's lodgings in Wine Street. On gaining entry, they conducted a thorough search of Bull's room, discovered 39 'seditious' pamphlets and thwarted a spirited attempt by the tailor's wife to grab a handful from the cupboard and conceal them behind her back. The prisoner was then taken before Harington and shown a further copy of the pamphlet which the mayor alleged had been surrendered to him by another tailor of Bull's acquaintance, James Howe. According to Harington, Bull had persistently tried to push the pamphlet upon Howe that morning in the market. Howe eventually acquiesced but took it directly to the Town Hall and made a statement to Harington.<sup>2</sup>

The offending piece of literature was Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*. Generally regarded today as 'a classic of democracy'<sup>3</sup>, this egalitarian tract was declared seditious when it first appeared in 1792 and its author tried in absentia for treason. To publish, circulate or possess a copy was a criminal offence.

Harington's determination to clear the streets not only of



1 Henry Harington, MD, mayor of Bath 1793–4. (Courtesy Bath Reference Library)

political radicals but of all 'beggars, ballad singers, prostitutes and disorderly persons'<sup>4</sup> during his term of office is understandable only in the context of the general fears awoken in Britain's ruling elite by the rhetoric of revolutionary France, and in the light of the particular apprehensions of the moneyed interests at Bath. Although demands for greater political influence had been growing steadily from the increasingly prosperous middling classes since the mid-eighteenth century, the formation in January 1792 of the artisan-led London Corresponding Society heralded for the first time a co-ordinated nationwide working-class concern with

political reform. Working-class crowds had already lent support to middle-class campaigns for the abolition of rotten boroughs and the limitation of the power of the Crown, but had not until now adopted a political programme for the remedy of their own grievances and poverty. The London Corresponding Society advocated annual parliaments, an end to rotten boroughs, and most important of all, universal manhood suffrage. Loosely federated provincial societies proliferated in the ensuing months, inspired partly by the French Revolution, partly by a popular and traditional belief in recovering 'lost' rights and liberties, and partly by Thomas Paine whose work they assiduously distributed at the risk of heavy fines and imprisonment. The scope for building a mass campaign in favour of constitutional reform, and manhood suffrage in particular, was wide. At Bath the electoral franchise was restricted to the thirty members of the Corporation, a mere 0.1% of the city's population. Such exclusivity denied a political voice not only to the labouring poor, but to a growing phalanx of tradesmen, entrepreneurs and property owners.

The ruling classes clung to power by marshalling an apparently ad-hoc range of forces from the encouragement of Francophobic patriotism to a repressive cycle of legislation that was cynically dubbed a 'reign of terror' by its opponents. For Benjamin Bull – promoter of what loyalists were calling 'the wild doctrine of EQUALITY, newly propagated'<sup>5</sup> – the justice of the local bench was severe. At the October Quarter Sessions he was sentenced to twelve months in Bath gaol, a 20/- fine and a binding-over order for two years. His wife and five children, left unprovided for in their single room to endure the worst economic crisis and famine of the decade, were 'sickly and destitute' by August 1795 and appealing for charity.<sup>6</sup>

Before looking more closely at Bath's radicals, it is useful to examine the strands and motives of local loyalism, for its inception in 1792 actually preceded the most overt periods of radical activity in the city. Dependent then, as now, upon tourism for an economic base, Bath's eighteenth-century administrators were generally uneasy about working-class crowds whatever their professed allegiance. The 'Gordon rioters' who burned the city's Catholic chapel to the ground and looted the adjoining properties in 1780 may superficially have done so in support of 'Church and King', but that was no consolation to the wealthy visitors who

fled in droves from the disorder. The magistrate Francis Bennett expressed the concerns of all his class in a letter to the mayor when the riot was over: 'I hope that the judicious and ever worthy mayor and Corporation of this city will do all that lies in their power to re-establish its former lustre', he wrote.<sup>7</sup> Bath's prosperity as a fashionable resort was conditional upon its unruffled continuity as a haven for wealthy residents, invalids and seasonal visitors. In June 1794 an attempt was even made by 'several respectable inhabitants' to persuade the mayor to cancel a planned public illumination to celebrate Lord Howe's naval victory over the French because they feared disorder and 'disturbance to the houses of invalids'. The Corporation decided to go ahead regardless, but appealed for 'the peaceable conduct of our LOYAL CITIZENS'. With some relief the mayor published his 'grateful remembrance' to the crowd when the event passed off without incident. But any kind of disorder was a serious matter. As a loyal declaration to the Corporation from 326 sedan chair carriers (arguably the most overtly deferential occupation the city's service economy could support) put it in 1792: 'We are conscious that our livelihood and the happiness of our families and ourselves depends entirely upon the prosperity and peace of the kingdom in general and of this city in particular'.<sup>8</sup>

Official loyalist sentiment became synonymous with the desire for economic and social stability, both of which were demonstrably absent in the one country where 'political equality' was being actively pursued – France. Working men and women, concerned both by the destabilising encroachment of industry upon traditional forms of work and by the unknown effects of meddling with the constitution, were as likely to be loyalist as radical. Following Edmund Burke's argument that Paine's notions of political liberty, equality and republican democracy were not just alien to British tradition and therefore unsuitable, but essentially unnatural and an affront to social order and harmony, Bath Corporation played upon the disorder in France to discredit local radicalism. Sergeant Lens, Kings Counsel for the prosecution of one Bath democrat in 1794, put it this way: 'It is your Duty as Loyal and Good subjects to watch over the happy welfare of this City. To Support and Preserve our happy Constitution; To stop the tongue of Seditious slanderers; To put a Bridle to their mouths . . . that we may avoid the miseries and Anarchy now in France.'<sup>9</sup>

GUILDHALL, BATH.

Dec. 29, 1792.



ASSOCIATION  
FOR PRESERVING  
*Liberty, Property, and the Constitution of Great-Britain,*  
AGAINST  
REPUBLICANS and LEVELLERS.

At the Meeting of the Society held this Day,  
ABEL MOYSEY, Esq. *Mayor*, in Chair;

IT WAS RESOLVED,  
THAT all Heads of Families residing in this  
City, as well as those who resort to it, be request-  
ed to caution their Domesticks against assembling  
or meeting together in a disorderly Manner, or  
using any Language disrespectful to the King or  
Constitutional Government of this Country; and  
that this Request be fixed up in the Pump-Rooms,  
Assembly-Rooms, Town-Hall, and in all other  
conspicuous Places in this City.

*Signed by Order of the Committee,*  
W. MEYLER, SECRETARY.

HAZARD, TYP.

- 2 A loyalist broadside of 1792. Fear of disorderly 'Domesticks' was the cause, eight years later, of the banning of footmen from all public buildings. (Courtesy Bath Record Office)

importance of such ceremonial and ritualistic displays of patriotic loyalism and benevolence in securing the goodwill of the lower orders should not be overlooked. The mock execution was dramatic and memorable, and much to the taste of the *Bath Chronicle*:

The effigy of Tom Paine, placed in a cart loaded with faggots, with his seditious pamphlet in one hand and a pair of stays in the other, was drawn to the top of Beechen Cliff and there hoisted on a pole, his body being filled with combustibles, was set fire to and his head blown off; his carcass was then thrown onto a large bonfire and consumed amidst the firing of cannon and the loudest acclamations of a numerous multitude.

The extravagance of the burnings is well demonstrated by the event organised and paid for by the Batheaston Association in January 1793. For £44 the Association provided an iron gibbet, 58 colourful costumes, inscribed banners and pendants, two hog-heads of strong beer, a band of music and a choir. There was a company of Queens Bays with drums and trumpets and 'numerous respectable freeholders on horseback'. It was an impressive display of hierarchy, plenty, and firm justice.<sup>12</sup>

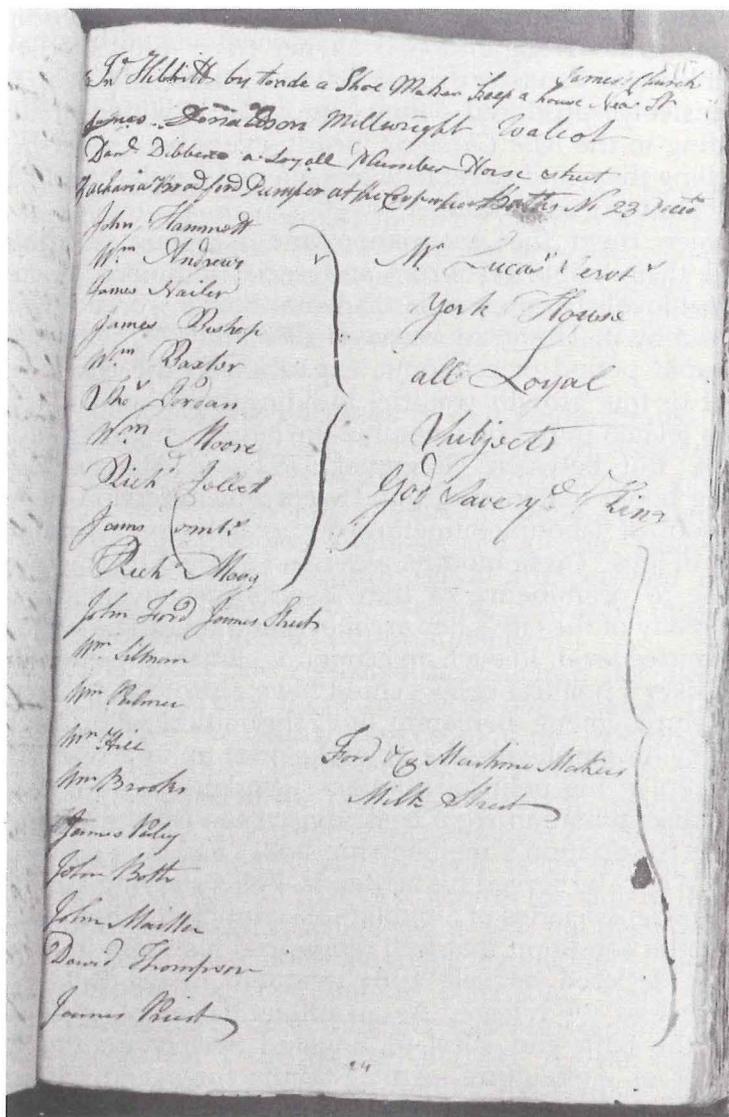
Working alongside the Association, although not always in agreement with it, was the evangelical pamphleteer Hannah More. She rejected the drunken excesses of the Paine burnings, concentrating her efforts instead upon the production of Cheap Repository Tracts, moralistic homilies insistently reminding the masses that their social lowliness was ordained by the Almighty, to whom 'an honest hogler' was as good as 'an honest squire'. With her steady conviction that God was on the side of the King and Constitution, More's achievement was to theologise the loyalist platform in the plainest language, exploiting popular fears of divine retribution against ungodly behaviour. 'God can send losses in trade, a heavy debt, or a secret and unaccountable blast on a man's character', she warned in 1795. A year later More published a piece of doggerel attributing the terrible famine of 1795-6 to divine displeasure:

He marked our angry spirits rise  
 Domestic hate increase  
 And for a while withheld supplies  
 To teach us love and peace.

More was based in Great Pulteney Street and on the Mendip hills throughout the 1790s and had all her tracts published by the staunchly loyalist master printer, Samuel Hazard of Cheap Street. Inexpensively produced, they enjoyed a wide circulation. According to the *Bath Chronicle* 'nearly every bookseller in Bath' was selling them and street hawkers queued regularly at Hazard's for discount-priced bundles.<sup>13</sup>

Between them the Association and religious pamphleteers utilised their ample resources and social influence to create a powerful loyalist propaganda machine. Bath's workers were not unmoved by it. The years between 1788 and 1792 witnessed the most rapid period of economic expansion in the city's history. Central to this growth was the building trade which, together with its related industries, became the largest employer of labour in Bath. But between December 1792 and March 1793, the building boom flattened out and went into recession, leaving a large pool of labour competing desperately for a diminishing supply of jobs. These months were also marked by the founding and rise to prominence of the Association movement, within which many of the city's key architects and financiers were active at committee level. In such an economic climate the open display of a worker's political beliefs could have a profound effect upon future employment. Benjamin Bull, the radical tailor, had been sacked by his employer several weeks prior to his arrest for being outspoken in his political opinions. Workers wishing to avoid similar discrimination were best advised to visit the Guildhall to sign the Association's membership book, and several thousand did so. Whilst he served his sentence, Bull's starving family were made the beneficiaries of a public subscription for their relief, but only on the condition that Bull renounced his sedition in public. He duly declared himself 'truly penitent' in the *Bath Herald* a month before his release. As an influential employers' organisation, the Bath and West of England Society for the Encouragement of Agriculture, Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, placed all trades under pressure. It pledged 'great ardour' and 'the strongest unanimity' in its support for the Association and actively sought loyal declarations from workers.<sup>14</sup>

The Friendly Societies Act of 1793 encouraged trades' benefit societies to register with the County bench and have their funds protected by law in return. There was considerable suspicion

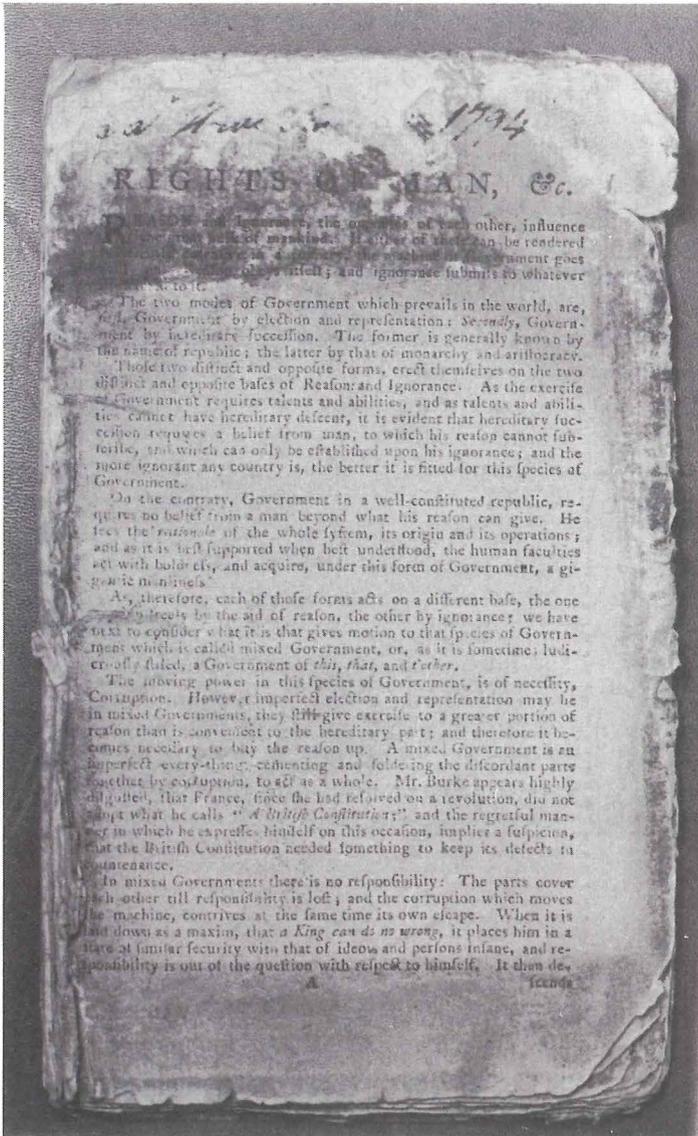


- 3 A page from the signature book of the loyalist Association. Ten servants at York House testify their support while John Ford signs up his entire thirty-strong workforce. Self-determined popular loyalism or coercion in the work place? The book contains 448 collective 'signatures' like these. (Courtesy Bath Record Office)

amongst the authorities that funds were often used for political purposes and that benefit societies offered, in the Board of Agriculture's opinion, 'commodious opportunities to foment sedition'. Under the Act societies would be able to secure a licence only by presenting the magistrates with their rule book for approval. The master printer William Gye approached seven Bath societies in the winter of 1793, offering to draw up and present to the bench such rules as would meet their approval. Each society was persuaded to adopt a pledge to fine any member the sum of 10/6d if he was so much as accused of 'uttering or promoting seditious language'. As the *Bath Journal* reported, the County bench were most sympathetic. 'This clause met with the universal approbation of the court and it was instantly agreed that all clubs who introduced the same clause in future should have the sanction of the said court'. By 1800 all sixteen of the city's societies had adopted Gye's clause and won their licence, and some, like the Bath Loyal True Britons in 1794, had even chosen suitable titles. Displays of loyalism continued to make sound sense. When thirteen societies paraded to the Guildhall to congratulate the mayor on Howe's naval victory, they were rewarded with 'many liberal donations from the inhabitants of this city to encourage the generous display of their Loyalty'.<sup>15</sup>

Many Bath workers responded to the call for recruits to fight the French when war was declared in 1793. But escape from the recession and the attraction of generous bounties played their part in this as much as deep-seated patriotism. Bath Corporation offered 40/- to every able-bodied seaman who enlisted in February, and 20/- to every ordinary seaman. In May a 10-guinea bounty was made available to recruits into the infantry. By April 1600 Bath men had enlisted for service. At a time when the average daily wage of an unskilled general labourer in the city (20% of the adult male workforce) was 1/6d, the financial inducement was considerable. A failure by the authorities at Bristol to pay the promised bounty caused a serious mutiny in 1795. Three hundred recruits refused to embark at Pill until they were paid and it took a joint assault from dragoons and infantry with fixed bayonets to subdue and force them aboard. Clearly, these were not men for whom a patriotic desire to fight England's enemies over-rode more straightforward pecuniary considerations.<sup>16</sup>

Some trades were specifically distrusted by the city's loyalists.



4 One of the cheaply produced copies of Paine's 'Rights of Man' seized from the tailor Benjamin Bull after his arrest in 1794. (Courtesy Bath Record Office)

The journeyman tailors, from whose ranks Benjamin Bull had stepped, were considered by the Town Clerk to be 'perpetually talking and conversing on politics and frequently forming into factious parties . . . the universal theme among these low people being nothing but politics'. Loyalism was not all-pervading nor as unequivocally triumphant as many of the more public utterances of its leaders have suggested. Half-seen glimpses of clandestine discontent are perhaps best demonstrated by the case of Edward Harington, son of Dr Henry, who wrote and published his *Desultory Thoughts on the Atrocious Cruelties of the French Nation* in September 1794. It was welcomed noisily by the *Bath Journal* which serialised it and drew particular attention to the author's caustic afterword, 'An Admonitory Address to ALL BRITISH JACOBINS'. This brought results, though not quite as intended. The outside of Edward Harington's house was 'daubed with filth and mire' in the middle of the night by persons unknown. Although the author offered a two guinea reward for their identity, it does not appear to have been claimed.<sup>17</sup>

Our knowledge of Bath's radical organisations is largely limited to the evidence of informers and the proceedings of the law courts, and is consequently sketchy. Two middle-class reform societies, The Bath Society to Promote a Reform of Parliament and a More Equal Representation of the People, and the Bath Constitutional Society, had existed since November 1792 and February 1793 respectively. A Corresponding Society aligned with the parent body in London had existed at Bristol since early in 1792 and although there is no record of the founding of the Bath branch, a government informer claimed by the summer of 1794 that 'It is well-known this part of the nation (Somerset) abounds with societies of this kind'. In May another informer revealed that

One of the links of the chain of the treacherous Corresponding Societies lies in Bath. The behaviour of one Campbell, a bookseller, is outrageous . . . affixing to his shop window and door manuscript information of every Article of intelligence that appears adverse and offering every Seditious inflammatory publication that comes out . . . In Defiance of the Magistrates, he has sold great numbers of Payne's [sic] Rights of Man'.<sup>18</sup>

J.B.C. Campbell was an American-born republican and Wesleyan methodist. From his shop in Burton Street he ran a

circulating library and bookbinding business and worked with the Wesleyan 'Poor Strangers' benefit society to bring charitable relief and spiritual salvation to the city's destitute. His poetry was occasionally published in Bath newspapers despite its anti-militarist bent, and his millenarian tendencies found an outlet in several self-published pamphlets. Campbell reprinted and annotated the 'prophesies' of past dissenting ministers like Fletcher and Jurieu, demonstrating his belief in the French Revolution as a fulfilment of Biblical prophecy. Louis XIV was the Anti-Christ whilst the Revolution prefaced 'the fall of Popery' and 'the setting up of Christ's kingdom on Earth'. Campbell fits into the popular anti-Catholic tradition of the Gordon rioters a decade earlier. However, loyalist sympathies for French Catholics had been aroused by their persecution under the Terror, and Bath was currently playing host to a great many French clerical refugees. The religious divisions underlying eighteenth-century social and political debate are brought to the surface by Campbell's case. The information lodged against him by the government informer in 1794 implied that he was secretary to the Bath Corresponding Society and that he held weekly meetings above his shop. His betrayer exposed religious as well as political prejudice by including in his letter, as though it were pertinent, the fact that Campbell was a known dissenter. Two months after these disclosures Campbell went bankrupt and left the city. This misfortune may not have been coincidental. Synonymously with Campbell's ruin, the Milsom Street draper Thomas Coward and a teacher named Fowler courted bankruptcy when they both became the subjects of a boycott for their alleged (and hotly denied) Jacobin sympathies.<sup>19</sup>

Rumours could be damaging and frequently got out of hand. Two weeks after applauding the principle of informing, the *Bath Chronicle* was deriding the over-enthusiasm of loyalists who were 'persistently misrepresenting remarks made in coffee houses' to 'maliciously incriminate' innocent people. In January 1794 someone remembered that the secretary of the Catch Club, dismissed from office during the anti-Jacobin purge, had once worked at the Theatre Royal. The Theatre was forced publicly to deny that it was riddled with sedition in the face of mounting suspicion to the contrary. Three wealthy tradesmen were sufficiently affronted by a rumour circulating at the height of the food

contradict the charge itself. Wylde's opinions were unquestionably reprehensible for, as the prosecution explained, Bath was a city 'where expressions of Loyalty and gratitude should alone be heard . . . The prisoner might be deemed too insignificant an object to create disorder, but the minutest seed of rebellion should never be suffered [else] its poison might contaminate everything around it'.<sup>22</sup>

In the worst nightmares of the ruling elite, this 'poison' ran the risk of contaminating the armed forces. The delicate social fabric of late eighteenth-century England was ordered essentially on the local scale. For day-to-day purposes the policing of society was decentralised, responsibility resting with the magistracy. Popular disturbances could often be averted by the mere assumption of their authority; and if not, by the temporary enrolment of special constables or enlistment of military aid. The importance of the militia as a bulwark against social disorder made its unquestioning loyalty imperative. Sergeant Seager of the Kings Dragoon Guards, billeted at Bath in 1794, was hauled before Harington in August accused of 'seditious utterances' by three men of his company. He endured an agonising week in Bath gaol whilst the secretary of state deliberated over whether to convene a court martial, but was released after witnesses conceded that he had only expressed a lack of 'relish' for fighting the French, and an opinion that the Prime Minister must be 'tired of the war'. Seager's relief would have been immense for, had he been found guilty, savage punishment was assured. At Wells a year earlier Peter West, a private in the 1st Somerset Militia, was clapped in irons and flogged almost to death for 'traitorous language against the King in the Crown public house'. He survived an incredible 400 lashes at a time when 24 was about the average for a misdemeanour. Deserters from the Navy could expect no more than 300 and would often get less. In December 1794 Private James Clark, a deserter from the 83rd Foot quartered at Bath, died after receiving 175 lashes of an 800-lash sentence. The inquest which followed could find no reason to place blame on the cruelty of the punishment and the coroner confessed that he considered it 'lenient'.<sup>23</sup>

Desertion from the army was a common crime. Frequently those recruits who had enlisted primarily in order to take advantage of the Corporation bounty absconded at the first opportunity. This is not to say that all deserters were motivated solely

by their dislike of military life. There was occasionally a more political aspect, as the case of two deserters apprehended at Bath in June 1794 clearly shows. As they were being led into the city gaol, they overpowered the turnkey, grabbed his keys and selected three other prisoners for liberation. Two were fellow deserters, but the third was the convicted radical hairdresser, Thomas Wylde. Harington, furious and alarmed at such a show of sympathy between soldiers and Jacobins, offered a ten-guinea reward for Wylde's recapture.<sup>24</sup>

The revival of the moribund Bath Association movement and its reconstitution as the Bath Loyal Volunteers Association in 1797 marked official recognition that, with much of the standing army occupied abroad, the country was ill-prepared to meet either a French invasion or an enemy within. The Volunteers were an early version of the Home Guard, made up mostly of master artisans and tradesmen (for the infantry) or professionals and gentlemen in the case of the cavalry, and charged with both the resistance of invasion and the suppression of internal Jacobinism. Their role as an armed wing of the civil power brought about some severe crises of loyalty, especially amongst the infantry, when ordered into action against fair-price demonstrators during times of shortage. Concerned at the ease with which any man could join the Volunteers and learn the use of arms, local newspapers urged vigilance against attempts by the Corresponding Societies to 'introduce disaffected persons into different military corps'. This was wise counsel for, between 1802 and 1804, the radical printer George Wilkinson joined the Bath regiment and attempted to subvert the officers by distributing pro-French propaganda amongst them. That Wilkinson had been able to remain undetected within the ranks of the Volunteers for up to two years when his previous conviction for seditious activities was a matter of public record indicates a low level of military security. In fact the authorities knew at the time of his trial in 1794 that he had been on the run from magistrates in Dublin for membership of the Irish Volunteers and that he had come to Bath to evade their warrants. Following his release from gaol, Wilkinson renewed links with the armed Irish republican movement, becoming a key messenger for the United Irishmen in their negotiations with France by 1799. The Home Office had him under surveillance and considered him 'an old offender'.<sup>25</sup>

The attempts of the United Irishmen to establish sympathetic revolutionary cells on English soil were unwittingly given a helping hand by the Pitt ministry's 'reign of terror' against domestic radicalism. The Two Acts of 1795, designed to destabilise radical organisations, widened the legal definition of treason and outlawed large public meetings. By making peaceful agitation for democratic reform all but impossible, the government undoubtedly speeded a number of radicals straight into the arms of insurrectionary elements. Henry Harington was disturbed by the discovery of Corresponding Society handbills calling on the people of Bath to prepare for and assist in a French invasion as early as 1794, and he was particularly suspicious about the intentions of many of the city's French visitors. The miniature painter De Courville for instance had been seen visiting Campbell's house earlier in the year. The mayor was uneasy but cautious: 'Although no specific charges can be brought, yet their appearance and conduct afford cause of suspecting their intentions to be rather unfavourable at this crisis . . .'. There is no firm evidence that armed conspiracies were being seriously contem-



5 Francophobia encapsulated. Rowlandson's 'Contrast' was widely circulated as a loyalist handbill. (Courtesy Bath Reference Library)

plated until 1797.<sup>26</sup> In that year Thomas Evans, a divisional secretary of the London Corresponding Society, founded a secretive national network of United Britons aiming at co-operative work with the United Irishmen. The success of a rising in Ireland would depend upon an alliance with the French and simultaneous insurrections in key English cities and ports to divert or obstruct the passage of British troops to resist it.

In the early spring of 1797 Evans sent an agent, William Bennett, with instructions 'to carry a certain quantity of pikes to Bristol and plant a society there of United Britons'. By the summer Bennett had turned his attention to Bath where he worked in the company of six journeyman shoemakers and a tailor who, in the opinion of the mayor, were 'much addicted to inflame and promote sedition', agitating, leafleting and 'making parole declarations in an alehouse'. On 9 August the group was informed against by two loyalist chairmen, and four of them, Bennett, Thomas Robins, James Green and George Hucklebridge, were arrested and charged with sedition. The magistrates discovered 'the form of a Pike which they wished to have made' drawn roughly on the reverse of a leaflet in Bennett's pocket, and sent it straight to the Duke of Portland at the Home Office as evidence. Portland was not yet ready to make his move against the United Britons however, and he advised against prosecution. All four were subsequently discharged at the Quarter Sessions. Bennett was particularly fortunate for he had only recently been released from custody at Bristol after being beaten up by a loyalist mob for selling radical papers. In April 1798 he was again arrested, this time in London during a major government offensive against the entire United Britons leadership. Faced with incriminating papers seized at Evans' house and aware that the conspiracy was now completely exposed, Bennett attempted to turn king's evidence. He successfully avoided prosecution but was not retained by the Crown as a witness nor used further as a government spy.<sup>27</sup>

Racked by arrests the United Britons fell into decline, but rumours that republicans were arming continued to circulate in the South West. In May 1798, following the unsuccessful republican rising in Ireland, suspicion fell on Irish immigrant groups at Bath and Bristol. Reports that the Bath Irish were arming and harbouring refugee United Irishmen were considered unlikely by

the *Bath Chronicle* but the Alien Office tightened surveillance nevertheless. By March 1799 the government had gathered sufficient evidence to issue warrants for the arrest of two United Irish representatives in Bristol who were thought to be plotting afresh and 'who hold regular correspondence with the rebels in Ireland'.<sup>28</sup>

As the strict war economy tightened its grip on the nation and poor harvests during 1799 and 1800 created greater scarcity, public enthusiasm for the ideological war with revolutionary France dropped away. Ironically, the legal decimation of Bath's radical societies between 1792 and 1797 left them unable to capitalise on the situation. Nevertheless, crowds with ostensibly economic grievances began to adopt political slogans. This was an unusual and dangerous trend. During the dearth of 1795 a group of women had stormed and occupied a grain barge moored at Bath quay, preventing its passage to Bristol and forcing its owner to unload the cargo with assurances that the grain would be retained for local consumption. Yet despite being attacked by a body of special constables and dragoons, the women had stood on the quay and sung 'God Save the King'. The defence of the moral economy had not then precluded loyalist sentiment. Now, however, the Town Clerk was alarmed by a new spate of leafleting 'exciting the populace to violence and insurrection' and forwarded an example to the Home Office which was headed 'Peace and a large Bread or a King without a Head!' As prices soared ever higher, the city's Provision Committee for the Relief of the Poor accepted that 'bread is now almost out of the possible reach of a poor man's purchase'. In March 1800 the mayor and several local industrialists received anonymous letters threatening incendiary attacks upon their property if prices were not lowered. An unsuccessful attempt to set fire to Stothert's ironworks was followed on 8 March by the razing of Williams' brewery and destruction of 20,000 bushels of malt and barley on the quay. The Corporation responded by offering substantial rewards for the capture of the arsonists and 'the writers of the many treasonable and seditious papers stuck up and found in many parts of this city', but to no avail. The Volunteers patrolled the streets for several nights looking for fire-raisers; public houses were cleared by order at 11p.m. and a strict curfew imposed. Another anonymous letter was discovered a week later in the

Post Office courtyard, threatening further attacks against the mayor, magistrates and Corporation, bakers, brewers, butchers and others.<sup>29</sup>

Fear of the 'indecent and riotous behaviour' of the city's numerous footmen led to their banishment from all public buildings in April. As mutual suspicion continued, a patrolling party of dragoons fell upon an innocent man in Westgate Street one night in May and beat him within an inch of his life. Although a sergeant was subsequently made the scapegoat and dismissed from service, incidents of this kind did nothing to increase the esteem in which the public held the civil or military authorities. In May and October the Volunteers were ordered into action in the city, first to disperse a mainly female group protesting at the high price of potatoes and then against a peaceful procession of Paulton colliers requesting a decrease in the price of all provisions. The second action in particular cost them a good deal of popular support, for the colliers had not acted in a disorderly manner but had simply waited on the mayor and requested that he take action. Sections of the Bath crowd were heard to criticise the miners for not having 'come in a different manner and bring pikes'. A prisoner taken on the day confirmed that this had been 'an allusion to the proceedings of the Irish rebels'.<sup>30</sup>

Loss of public confidence was one cause of a severe waning of morale amongst the Volunteers. Absence without leave became so bad at Bath that several parades had to be cancelled and threats published in local newspapers by the embarrassed officers, ordering non-attenders to return to duty. The threats were empty. Since the Volunteers did not fall within military jurisdiction, desertion was punishable only by the imposition of fines and there was no way of enforcing even these. At Marlborough eleven men deserted at once, ignoring all entreaties to return, and the Shepton Mallet troop formally expelled three men for non-cooperation and 'abusive language against the corps'. It rapidly became clear to the Establishment that the usefulness of the Volunteers as a force against disorder and invasion was severely limited, partly because their annual ammunition allowance was restricted to not more than six rounds per man (with most of these being expended during ceremonial parades), but partly also because the recruits were insufficiently motivated. Enrolment in the Volunteers was not without its perks. It was the means by

which any man might openly display his loyalism whilst at the same time claiming exemption from militia duty and payment of the hair-powder tax. The Bristol regimental commander was 'mortified' by his troop's inattention to parade duty' in 1800 and 'much concerned' in 1804 when most of them ignored an order to turn out and guard property salvaged from two serious fires. Elsewhere in the South West the problem was more acute, some Volunteers actually leading fair-price demonstrators into action instead of dispersing them. There were also pitched battles (with fatalities) between recruiting parties for the regular forces, and hostile crowds at this time in Bristol, Portland and Swansea, despite very real threats of a French invasion. Hundreds of seamen, it was said, were hiding out in Kingswood Forest to evade the press gangs.

The historian Roger Wells has argued forcefully that at this juncture traditionally secure patterns of social deference were breaking down in an unprecedented way. Public order, the reliability of troops and the will to resist an invading French army could no longer be guaranteed in many parts of Britain – and the South West was no exception. In March 1801 a panicked Somerset County magistracy suspended the Riot Act (the reading of which entitled crowds to a period of grace before being forcibly broken up) and sanctioned the use of the military 'without any reference to the Act' in view of 'the alarming state of the county'. Food rioters were treated to the full rigour of the law with executions at Taunton and Ilchester in April and September for three men convicted of stealing small quantities of staple foods and conspiring to force prices down.<sup>31</sup>

The fact remains of course that the crisis of 1800–01 passed without either invasion or domestic insurrection and few historians have attached a great deal of importance to it. The absence by this time of any strong political network to lend cohesion and leadership to the unrest in the region meant that social order was quickly restored with the importing of foreign grain and the consequent fall in prices.

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The image of a largely contented working class, unwavering in its patriotic commitment to Church and King in the wake of the

French Revolution, is a political myth. Popular enthusiasm for radical reform was countered by a multi-faceted loyalist onslaught that permeated and influenced every aspect of later Georgian society. The apparent triumph of the Association movement should not be overstated however. The Bath Association rose to the peak of its influence during the winter of 1792–3 and then fell into decline. Committee quorums were reduced to combat dwindling attendance and a scheduled meeting in April 1793 had to be abandoned altogether. In December, after a year of activity, the Association brazenly proclaimed its victory over 'dangerous principles' by the 'coercion of the law'. Yet at this time only George Wilkinson had been arrested for a seditious offence in Bath and the Corresponding Society was still meeting regularly at Campbell's house (if informers' reports are to be believed). Four months later the Association ceased regular meetings and does not appear to have reconvened until its relaunch in February 1797 to spearhead the recruitment of Volunteers.

Nor was the 'coercion of the law' unerringly dynamic. Despite Harington's success in bringing three convictions against working-class radicals during his mayoralty, not one of the eight subsequent cases taken up between August 1794 and July 1801 brought a positive result. As the war dragged on and the Association movement declined, juries began to show a marked reluctance to convict. At the trial of Benjamin Bull a friend to whom he had entrusted some pamphlets, Hannah Bess, turned king's evidence and implicated three more tailors whom she had met at the Red Post Inn on the road to Radstock. Yet no attempt appears to have been made to apprehend them or conduct further inquiries. Whatever the rhetoric of the Association movement, a coordinated approach to pursuing its aims was not its strong point.<sup>32</sup>

Radicals were intimidated less by the reality of legal harassment than by the threat of it. Evangelical and secular propaganda, coercion in the workplace, fear of unemployment or physical attacks by loyalist mobs, and social ostracisation played stronger roles than the repressive legislation of Pitt's ministry. One cannot seriously presume the thousands of workers who attended the Paine effigy burnings in the winter of 1792–3 to have been motivated by an abhorrence of the victim's pamphlets or principles. Few, even amongst those who could read, can have had

much opportunity to see a copy of *Rights of Man* by that date. Staying away risked courting the displeasure of employers and workmates at a time when anyone might be denounced as a traitor on the slightest pretext. On the other hand, the burnings represented a good evening's entertainment with singing, dancing, food and copious supplies of drink, all paid for by a generous local gentry. The loyalist offensive, it must be said, depended less upon the awakening of a genuine patriotic response in the popular mind than the mobilisation of an elite minority and their access to the complex machinery of social persuasion, bribery and control.

## Notes

- 1 Loyal toast attributed to Harington in J. Murch, *Bath Celebrities* (Bath 1893), p.149.
- 2 Bath Record Office, Indictment King v Bull, Philip George Papers.
- 3 Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, H. Collins (ed.), (London, 1969), p. 47.
- 4 *Bath Herald* 9 Nov 1793.
- 5 Bath Record Office, Bath Association Minute Book, poster dated 8 Dec 1792.
- 6 *Bath Chronicle* 18 Aug 1794; *Bath Herald* 5 Aug 1795.
- 7 R.S. Neale, *Bath 1680–1850: a Social History* (London, 1981), pp. 311–2.
- 8 *Bath Journal* 16 June 1794; 23 June 1794. Bath Record Office, Bath Assoc. Minute Book, 15 Dec 1792.
- 9 Bath Record Office, Indictment King v Wilkinson.
- 10 Bath Record Office, Bath Assoc Minute Book (undated broadside), *Bath Register & Western Advertiser* 16 Dec 1792.
- 11 Bath Record Office, Bath Assoc Minute Book, 14 and 22 Dec 1792; *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* 4 Jan 1794.
- 12 *Bath Herald* 22 Dec 1792; 14 Feb 1793; *Bath Chronicle* 20 Dec 1792.
- 13 M. More, *Mendip Annals* (London, 1859), p. 94, 151; H. More, *Hints to All Ranks of People on the Occasion of the Present Scarcity* (Bath and London, 1795); H. More, *A Hymn of Praise for the Abundant Harvest of 1796* (Bath, 1796); *Bath Chronicle* 27 Dec 1792.
- 14 R.S. Neale, op cit; *Bath Chronicle* 13 Dec 1792; *Bath Herald* 15 Aug 1795.
- 15 R.A. Leeson, *Travelling Brothers* (London, 1979), p. 98; *Rules & Orders . . . of the Bath Loyal True Britons* (Bath, 1794); *Bath Journal* 20 Jan 1794, 16 June 1794.
- 16 *Bath Register* 2 Feb 1793, 11 May 1793, 13 Apr 1793; *Bath Journal* 20 July 1795; For wage figures see R.S. Neale, op cit.
- 17 Bath Record Office, King v Bull; *Bath Journal* 27 Sept 1794.
- 18 *Bath Chronicle* 15 Nov 1792, 6 Feb 1793; *Annual Register* 1792, Vol. 2 (1821 edition), p. 153; Public Record Office, Kew, H.O. 42/32 Anon – Dundas 4 July 1794; H.O. 42/30 Anon – Dundas 12 May 1794.
- 19 *Bath Chronicle* 6 Dec 1793; *Bath Herald* 12 July 1794, 14 June 1794; *Bath Register*

- 2 Mar 1793, 24 Aug 1793; J.C.B. Campbell, *Prophecies of the Remarkable Events Now Taking Place in Europe* (Bath, 1793).
- 20 *Bath Journal* 6 Jan 1794, 6 July 1795.
- 21 Bath Record Office, King v Wilkinson; *Bath Herald* 18 Jan 1794.
- 22 Bath Record Office, King v Wylde; *Bath Herald* 3 May 1794.
- 23 *Bath Chronicle* 21 Feb 1793, 26 Aug 1794, 2 Sept 1794; *Bath Journal* 15 Dec 1794; W.J.W. Kerr, *Records of the First Somerset Militia* (London, 1930), p. 30.
- 24 *Bath Herald* 7 June 1794.
- 25 *Bath Chronicle Notes & Queries*, 7 March 1942; M. Elliott, *Partners In Revolution: The United Irishmen and France* (New Haven, Conn. 1982), pp. 256, 278.
- 26 Public Record Office, Kew, H.O. 42/28 Morgan – Dundas 6 June 1794, Harington – Dundas 9 Feb 1794.
- 27 *Bath Journal* 12 Aug 1797; *The Times* 21 Apr 1798, 26 May 1798; [King], *Statement of the Facts Relevant to the Riot in Union Street . . .* (Bristol, 1797); Bath Record Office, Quarter Sessions Calendars, 5 October 1797; Public Record Office, Kew, H.O. 42/41 Jefferies – Portland 11 Aug 1797; Public Record Office, Chancery Lane, P.C. 1/42/A140 Bennett – Wickham 30 Apr 1798 (2 letters).
- 28 *Bath Chronicle* 3 May 1798; Bristol Record Office, Town Clerks Letter Boxes, Portland – Mayor of Bristol 30 Mar 1799.
- 29 *Bath Journal* 10, 17 and 24 March 1800; *Bath Herald* 8 Aug 1795; Public Record Office, Kew, H.O. 42/52 Town Clerk – Portland 11 Nov 1800.
- 30 *Bath Journal* 21 Apr 1800, 5 and 12 May 1800; *Bath Chronicle* 23 Oct 1800; R. Wells, *Wretched Faces: Famine in Wartime England 1793–1803* (Gloucester, 1988), p. 145.
- 31 *Bath Chronicle* 29 Mar 1804; *Bath Journal* 29 Sept 1800; Bristol Public Library, 'Volume of Notices Relating to Bristol Volunteers 1797–1810'; Wiltshire County Record Office, 'Records of the Marlborough Volunteers 1797–1810'; R. Wells, 'The Revolt of the South West 1800–1', *Social History* Vol. 6 (1977); pp. 713–43; *Bath Chronicle* 9 & 23 Apr 1801, 3 Sept 1801.
- 32 Bath Record Office, King v Bull; Bath Assoc Minute Book (various entries).