

A “more shocking” massacre? How we might have overestimated the Peterloo crowds

By **Rachel Dinning**

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The number of people present at the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 may have been “significantly smaller” than previously thought, new research from the University of Warwick suggests.

More than 600 people were injured – and 18 people killed – when thousands of people gathered for a peaceful protest in Peterloo Square, Manchester in 1819.

But, claims Warwick historian Dave Steele, the crowd on the day is unlikely to have exceeded 32,000 people – almost half the “accepted figure of 60,000”.

Steele used mapping techniques to deduce that the area occupied by the protestors would have been around 16,000 square meters.

This means that the crowd is unlikely to have been larger than 32,000 – if it is assumed that two people occupied each square metre.

Explaining the significance of his research, Steele said: “It indicates that, from evidence that exists for confined areas, 19th-century reform crowds were significantly smaller than previously thought.

“Despite this, they were perceived to be powerful by the press, the public and (more significantly) the state, who went to extraordinary lengths to suppress them.”

According to Steele, this smaller figure in no way downplays the extent of the Peterloo tragedy.

“On the contrary,” he explains. “If my figures prove correct, then the casualty rate doubles to nearly two per cent of the crowd injured – an even more shocking outrage than previously thought.”

Ahead of the bicentenary of the Peterloo Massacre, new research from the University of Warwick suggests that the protest crowd at the 1819 event – in which 18 people were killed and more than 600 people injured – is “unlikely to have exceeded 32,000”

What do Peterloo experts make of the new research?

“[The latest] research is ingenious and sound, but – as Steele notes – a lot depends on contemporary descriptions of how dense the crowd was,” says Robert Poole, author of *Peterloo: the English Uprising*.

“There were some wild claims at the time, on both sides, and Steele’s research is within the academic target zone.

“Whatever the case, it was far and away the biggest political meeting ever held in Manchester – which is why it so alarmed the authorities.”

Peterloo expert Jacqueline Riding also highlights the variation between testimonies.

“Eye-witness accounts certainly varied regarding the scale of the crowd [at Peterloo],” says Riding, the author of *Peterloo: The Story of the Manchester Massacre*.

“William Hulton, chairman of magistrates, thought it was 50,000. The poet and radical Samuel Bamford guessed at 80,000, while Henry Hunt [the leading speaker of the reformists] declared in his memoirs (published a year after) that it was 180–200,000.”

“Indeed 32,000 is still a sizeable gathering,” she says, “if we consider that Manchester’s total population at the time was calculated at around 100,000.”

The bicentenary of the Peterloo Massacre will be marked on 16 August 2019.

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