The Corn Laws

After the end of the Napoleonic Wars it was feared that cheap foreign grain would flood the British market and that domestic producers would suffer financially. The first of the Corn Laws was introduced by the British Government in 1815 to protect domestic landowners and farmers from this threat. The high tariffs imposed made it too expensive to import grain, even when domestic supplies were in short supply. The price of bread increased and rioting was not uncommon. Eventually, despite strong opposition from his own party, Conservative Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel successfully repealed the law in 1846.

On display here is a selection of documents relating to the Corn Laws, including a political cartoon and election broadsheets (the topic featured prominently in election campaigns). The Anti-Corn Law League, a political movement set up in 1836, fought to abolish the Corn Laws and produced the innovative free-trade sticker seen here on an envelope dating from 1842.

All the documents presented here are held by the University of Nottingham at Manuscripts and Special Collections. The University collects archival material relating to the history of the University itself and its predecessor bodies, including the Midland Agricultural and Dairy College, the history of the East Midlands, and the research interests of the University. Over three million items are stored at Kings Meadow Campus. For more information on any of the items in the display or to arrange a visit to the Reading Room at Kings Meadow Campus visit www.nottingham.ac.uk/mss or email mss-library@nottingham.ac.uk
Cartoon entitled 'Political Balance', December 1816
The Fagan Collection of Political Prints and Caricatures, Pol P 25

This political cartoon depicts the 'Constitution' as an ill-balanced set of scales with the prices of basic foodstuffs rising on one side (well out of reach of the starving working man) and the 'coffin' bearing 'Old England' (weighed down by the Corn Bills) disappearing into the 'abyss of corruption' on the other. A member of the aristocracy looks on, pleased at the thought of the profits to be gleaned, whilst the King watches through a spyglass from Windsor. Published by T. Tegg, Cheapside.
The movement now in progress to erect a statue to George Macdonald at Huntly, the town in which he was born when George IV. was King, recalls (says the "St. James's Gazette"). an incident which many old inhabitants of Huntly will vividly remember. George Macdonald’s father, a Huntly man, was a successful merchant, and did an extensive business in oatmeal. His business was flourishing at the time of the Corn Laws agitation, and in some way the people got the idea into their heads that the millers were storing up corn for sale at famine prices. They decided to mark their disgust and contempt by burning the father of George Macdonald in effigy, and they were about to set a light to the figure when the good man himself came along, hopping on his wooden leg. Stopping to look at the figure, he said quietly, "Yes, boys, it's not at all bad; but it's a great pity you've made the wooden leg the wrong one!" The effigy, we are told, was not burned after all; it may be to this day in some lumber-room at Huntly.
TO THE
WORTHY & INDEPENDENT
ELECTORS
OF THE
Town of Nottingham.
BROTHER BURGESS.
YOU are again called upon to assert your Rights as Englishmen in the
return of fit and proper Persons to represent you in Parliament; a heavy responsibility
devolves upon you in making that choice; it is not the wrangling about Church and
State that should guide your judgment, it is your own immediate welfare and protection
from the cruel grasp of the death engendering CORN BILL; from Taxation too grievous
to be borne, by a sinking degraded Country! look around you, my Fellow Countrymen,
and say what has robbed you of your comforts, your daily bread, THE CORN BILL!!
what is it that has annihilated your Trade and Manufactures? what is it that acts as a
non-intercourse between England and the rest of the civilized World, and neutralizes
Commerce? THE CORN BILL! what is it that causes you to be clothed in rags, and
your families in wretchedness? THE CORN BILL! what is it that demoralizes the
People and consigns thousands to the degradation of the Workhouse or the Prison?
THE CORN LAWS!! what is it that causes parents to weep over their famishing
children? THE CORN LAWS!! Englishmen, are not these things far worse than
Negro Slavery? In the West Indies, a Slave or Negro has a price or value put upon him
from £50 to £200; but what is the value of the starving oppressed White Slaves of
England? your own feelings can best tell.
Fellow Countrymen, the painted cry of NO POPERY, and NO SLAVERY, is total delusion!
it is to draw your attention from your own IMMEDIATE WRONGS and OPPRES-
SIONS, to perpetuate a System upon you, more to be dreaded than the Pestilence! and
yet you are told by Mr. Wright that the LANDED INTEREST must be supported!!
to whom I would say, REDUCE YOUR ENORMOUS RENTALS! RESTORE THE COTTAGER AND
OPPRESS THE PEOPLE NO LONGER! the system cannot be endured much longer! make a
merit of necessity 'tis too late, by the RESTORATION OF THE PEOPLE TO THEIR JUST RIGHTS
AND COMFORTS, BY THE TOTAL REPEAL OF THE CORN LAWS!!
Fellow Countrymen, Mr. BIRCH and LORD RANCLIFFE have fully and unequivocally
expressed their sentiments and abhorrence of all the measures which oppress our
Common Country, and their willingness to Serve you to the utmost of their Power and
Ability; therefore desert them not in the hour of need! give them your Honest and
Unbought Votes, and the Victory will be Complete and Honourable.
Englishmen, forget not Mr. Wright's Motto, "THAT THE LANDED INTEREST MUST
BE SUPPORTED." THE CORN BILL, THE BANE OF ENGLISH COMMERCE!!
" Britons be firm, nor let Corruption sly,
Twine round your hearts indissoluble chains,
Determined hold your Independence, for that
Once destroyed, unfounded freedom is a morning dream,
That fits aerial from the spreading eye.
Hail, Independence, hail! Heavens best gift
To that of life and an immortal soul,
The life of life! that to the banquet high
And sober meal gives taste; to the bowed roof
Fair dreamed repose, and to the cottage charms.

AN ELECTOR.

R. S. Mapes, Printer.
Envelope addressed to Jonathan Priestman, 1842
Correspondence of Priscilla McLaren and Sir Henry Norman, N Mc 1/11

On the reverse of the envelope is an Anti-Corn Law sticker with the message “NO CORN LAWS WHY TAX THE POOR TO SUPPORT THE RICH”.
TO THE
ELECTORS
OF NOTTINGHAM.

The SIZE of the LOAF precious to the adoption of those measures which the Friends of the Blue Interest call "The good Old Cause."

The SIZE of the LOAF at the present time, and a PROOF of the ADVANTAGES derived from "The GOOD OLD CAUSE."

Thus, you have to consider which to choose, DEAR BREAD and the BLUE INTEREST, or CHEAP BREAD and the CAUSE of INDEPENDENCE.

Mr. BIRCH and LORD RANCLIFFE have PLEDGED THEMSELVES to support the REPEAL of the CORN BILL; Mr. Smith will not give any Pledge.

JUNE 18TH, 1818.

(J. DUNN, Printer.)
Lord George Bentinck (1802-1848), third son of the 4th Duke of Portland, had a short but influential political career. His chief interest was horse racing and his visits to Westminster were infrequent. However, he so vehemently opposed the repeal of the Corn Laws that in 1846 he became leader of the Protectionist cause, bringing about the fall of Peel and causing the permanent division of Peel's party.

The papers of Lord George Bentinck (Pw L) form part of the Portland (Welbeck) Collection held in Manuscripts and Special Collections and include extensive personal and political correspondence.