

The Corn Laws

A Corn Law was first introduced in Britain in 1804, when the landowners, who dominated Parliament, sought to protect their profits by imposing a duty on imported corn. During the Napoleonic Wars it had not been possible to import corn from Europe. This led to an expansion of British wheat farming and to high bread prices.

Farmers feared that when the war came to an end in 1815, the importation of foreign corn would lower prices. This fear was justified and the price of corn reached fell from 126s. 6d. a quarter in 1812 to 65s. 7d. three years later. British landowners applied pressure on members of the House of Commons to take action to protect the profits of the farmers. Parliament responded by passing a law permitting the import of foreign wheat free of duty only when the domestic price reached 80 shillings per quarter (8 bushels). During the passing of this legislation, the Houses of Parliament had to be defended by armed troops against a large angry crowd.

This legislation was hated by the people living in Britain's fast-growing towns who had to pay these higher bread prices. The industrial classes saw the Corn Laws as an example of how Parliament passed legislation that favoured large landowners. The manufacturers in particular was concerned that the Corn Laws would result in a demand for higher wages.

There was a dreadful harvest in 1816. This caused bread prices to increase rapidly. This was followed by industrial unrest as workers demanded higher wages in order to pay for the increased food prices. As well as strikes there were food riots all over Britain.

The Corn Laws had an important political impact on Manchester. It was one of the main reasons why the group of middle-class moderate reformers began meeting at the home of John Potter. It also influenced working class radicals and the Corn Laws was one of the main issues that was to be addressed at the meeting that they had organised at St. Peter's Field on 16th August, 1819.

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Primary Sources

(1) Archibald Prentice, *Historical Sketches and Personal Reminiscences of Manchester* (1851)

The manufacturers had opposed the corn bill, because they believed that rising the price of food would raise the wages of labour, and thus prevent their competition with the manufacturers of other countries.

(2) Resolution against the Corn Laws passed by manufacturers in Manchester on 23rd February, 1815.

A large exportation of our manufactures is absolutely necessary to their support, and their sale in foreign markets can be insured only by their superiority and cheapness. The proposed restrictions on the importation of corn must materially raise its price. No policy can be more short-sighted or unjust, than that which would redress the temporary grievances of a part of the community, by permanently sacrificing the best interests of the whole.

(3) Samuel Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical* (1843)

A series of disturbances commenced with the introduction of the Corn Bill in 1815 and continued, with short intervals, until the close of 1816. In London and Westminster riots ensued and were continued for several days; at Bridport there were riots on account of the high price of bread; at Bideford there were similar disturbances to prevent the export of grain; at Bury by the unemployed to destroy machinery; at Newcastle-on-Tyne by colliers and others; at Glasgow, where blood was shed, on account of soup kitchens; at Preston, by unemployed weavers; at Nottingham by Luddites who destroyed 30 frames; at Merthyr Tydvil, on a reduction of wages; at Birmingham by the unemployed; at Walsall by the distressed; and December 7th, 1816, at Dundee, where, owing to the high price of meal, upwards of 100 shops were plundered.

References

<https://spartacus-educational.com/PRcorn.htm>

The Anti Corn Laws League: Means of Propaganda

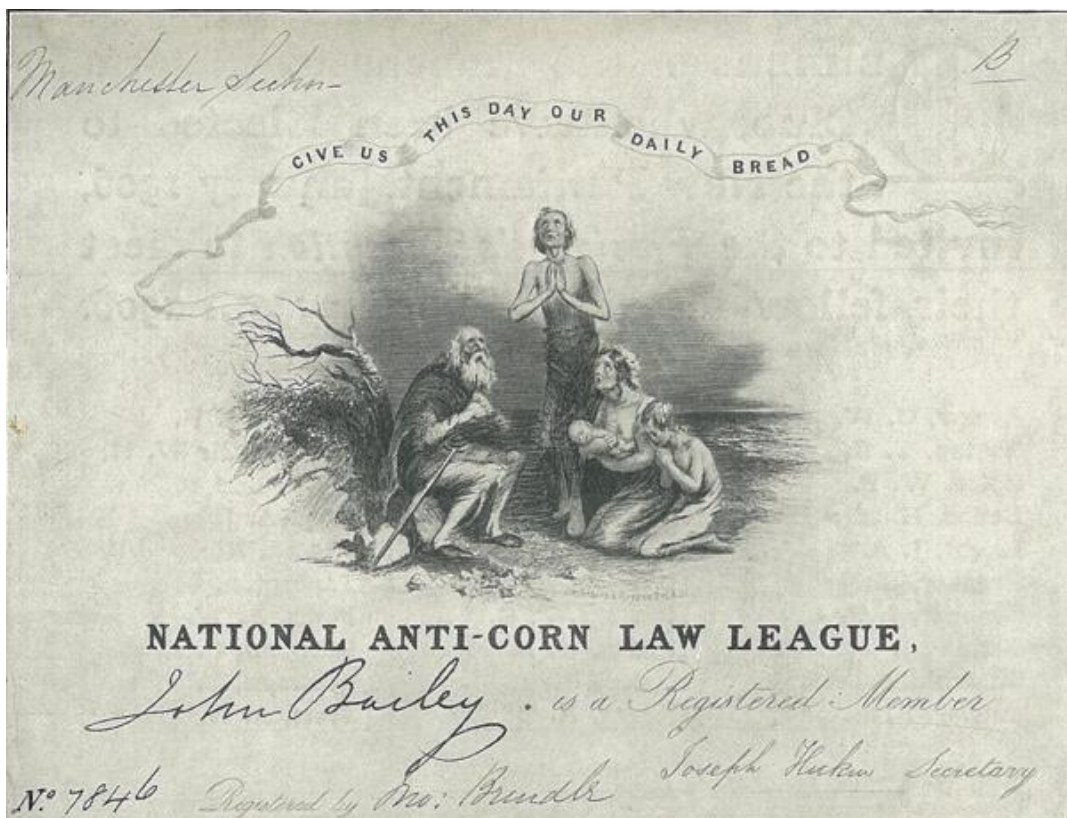
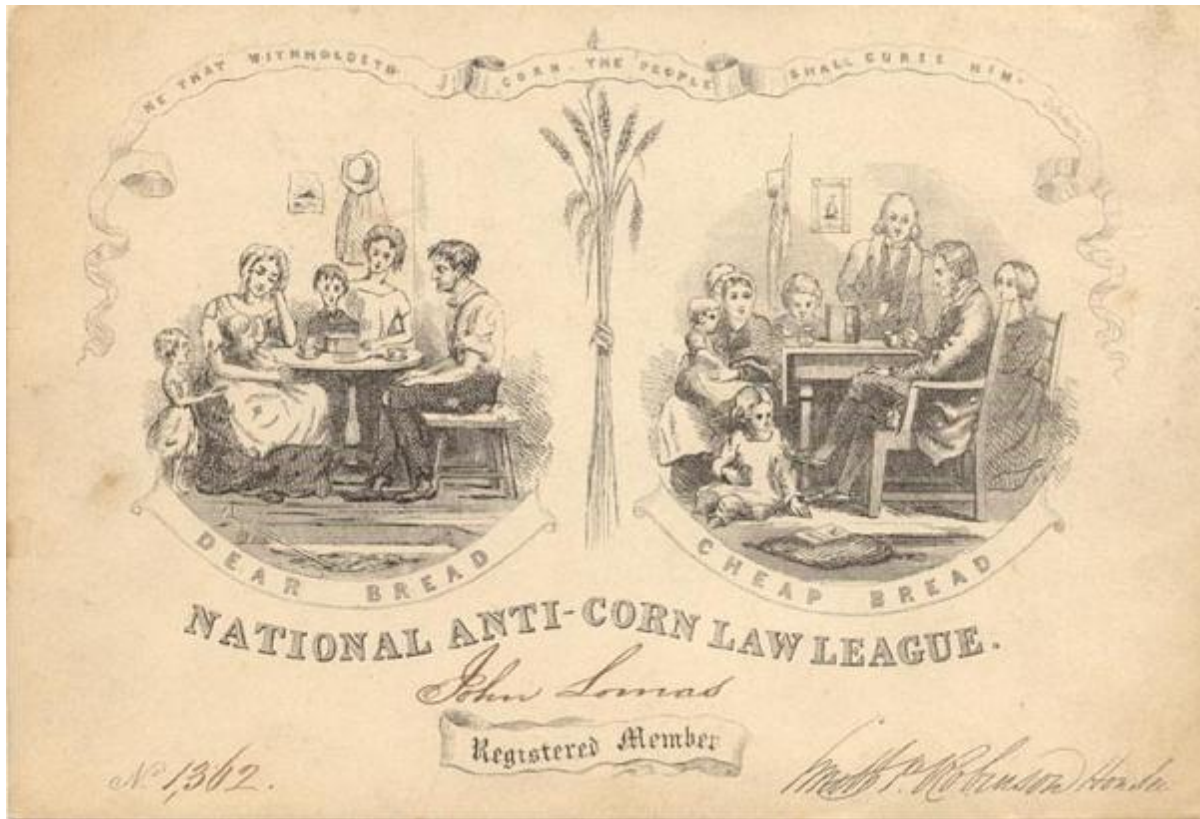


Illustration: Membership Cards for the National ACLL

Two examples of Membership Cards for the National Anti-Corn Law League:

Above: a membership card for "John Lomas", no. 1,362, which shows a poor family eating dear bread (protection) and a prosperous family eating cheap bread (free trade). They are separated by the ACLL symbol of a sheaf of wheat, beneath a banner which says "He that withholdeth corn, the people shall curse him."

Below: a card for "John Bailey" card holder no. 7846, which shows a starving family huddled beneath a quote from the Lord's Prayer

<https://oll.libertyfund.org/page/cobden-and-the-anti-corn-law-league>

Petitions to Parliament in 1841, concerning the Corn Laws

*During the general election of 1841, the Corn Laws became a focus of attention; the Anti-Corn-Law League increased its activities. After the victory of Sir Robert Peel and the Conservative Party, a series of petitions both for and against the maintenance of the Corn Laws were presented to parliament. **The following are examples of two such petitions***

The humble Petition of the undersigned, the Inhabitants of North and South Cadbury, in the county of Somerset,

Sheweth,

That we your Petitioners approach your honourable House under the most serious apprehension that the proposed alteration of the present Corn Law will be, if carried into effect, attended with dangerous consequences to the Nation, deluding the people with the expectation that cheap bread could be obtained without a corresponding lowering of wages, thereby raising hopes without the possibility of their being realised; that we consider that it is the first duty of the Legislature to ensure, as far as can be effected by human legislation, a certain, regular and sufficient supply of wheat for the consumption of the people, and that the present Corn Law effects that object as near as may be; in order that the supply of wheat may continue to be commensurate with the utmost wants of the people, every security and encouragement must be afforded to home cultivation; that as experience has shown the uncertainty of commercial intercourse, it will be most ruinous to all ranks of society to place dependence upon foreign countries for the supply of wheat, instead of mainly relying on our native resources, thereby throwing our own labourers out of work, and risking the chance at a future day of famine in our now plenteous land.

That we further consider that uncertainty and vacillation in the Corn Laws are ruinous to the enterprize, skill, and outlay of the farmer, useless to the manufacturing classes, whose main stay is the home market; and that it is the greatest injustice to place the British agriculturist and those connected with the land, who are the great consumers of manufactured goods, on a par with the cultivators of foreign soils, who are comparatively unburthened with taxation and unacquainted with English comforts.

That it appears to your Petitioners fearful to contemplate the total disorganization of engagements, such as mortgages, settlement, annuitants, interests, or national securities, which must follow the depreciated value of our soil, at present bearing the principal weight of Parliament and local taxation.

That your petitioners humbly trust the funds of our charitable institutions may not be impaired, nor our moral or political importance as a nation be lessened; and that the agricultural interests of Britain may not be sacrificed or made secondary to any other interest whatever.

We your Petitioners humbly but strongly pray, that the existing Corn Laws may remain unaltered.

James Bennett S. Blackall John Gifford &c. &c. &c.

The humble Petition of the undersigned Members and Friends of the Congregation of Protestant Dissenters, assembling for divine worship in the Old Gravel Pit Meeting House at Hackney,

Sheweth,

That your Petitioners contemplate with pain and distressing apprehension the continuance of certain Laws of Her Majesty's realm, the design and effect of which are to restrict the supply of the necessaries of human life, and greatly to increase their cost.

That the results of those unhappy Laws are now made manifest in the extreme sufferings of those classes of our fellow subjects which constitute the basis of our national strength, in the depression of manufactures, and their exportation to rival countries, in the miserabel [*sic*] inadequate wages of both agricultural and manufacturing industry, in the entire want of work to an alarming extent, in the hazardous and pernicious direction given to mercantile pursuits, and in a fearful tendency to the impoverishing and ruin of the nation.

That your Petitioners are especially affected by a rational and Christian conviction of the impiety involved in those Laws, as being in their nature a crime against God, and as in their practical operation productive of discontent, disloyalty, infidelity, profligacy of conduct, a rejection of the authority of religion, and by necessary consequence the most appalling dangers to the peace and security of all classes as to both property and person.

That therefore your Petitioners humbly and earnestly implore your honourable House to take these awful facts into your consideration, and to adopt prompt and effectual measures to stop the progress of national misery, and to prevent our common and irreparable ruin.

And your Petitioners shall ever pray.
John Pye Smith, D.D. F.R.S. Minister
John Jones
Stephen Olding &c. &c. &c.

Votes and Proceedings of the House of Commons (1841) (Appendix to Reports of the Select Committee on Public Petitions, 1841 session 2, nos 499, 568).

Reference

<http://www.historyhome.co.uk/peel/cornlaws/petition.htm>

Extracts from a Speech on Repeal of the Corn Laws, 15 May 1846

Sir Robert Peel [Added by Marjie Bloy, Ph.D.]

<http://www.victorianweb.org/history/cornlaws3.html>

My belief is, that in seeking the re-enactment of the existing law after its suspension, you would have had to contend with greater difficulties than you anticipate. I think you could have continued this law for a short time longer; but I believe that the interval of its maintenance would have been but short, and that there would have been during the period of its continuance, a desperate conflict between different classes of society, that your arguments in favour of it would have been weak; that you might have had no alternative, had the cycle of unfavourable harvest returned - and who can give an assurance that they would not? — but to concede an alteration of this law under circumstances infinitely less favourable than the present to a final settlement of the question. ...

It was the foresight of these consequences - it was the belief that you were about to enter into a bitter and, ultimately, an unsuccessful struggle, that has induced me to think that for the benefit of all classes, for the benefit of the agricultural class itself, it was desirable to come to a permanent and equitable settlement of this question. These are the motives on which I acted.

I do not rest my support of this bill merely upon the temporary ground of scarcity in Ireland, but I believe that scarcity left no alternative to us but to undertake the consideration of this question; and I think that a permanent adjustment of the question is not only imperative, but the best policy for all concerned. ... Now, all of you admit that the real question at issue is the improvement of the social and moral condition of the masses of the population; we wish to elevate in the gradation of society that great class which gains its support by manual labour. The mere interests of the landlords [and] occupying tenants, important as they are, are subordinate to the great question - what is calculated to increase the comforts, to improve the condition, and elevate the social character of the millions who subsist by manual labour, whether they are engaged in manufactures or in agriculture?

My earnest wish has been, during my tenure of power, to impress the people of this country with a belief that the legislature was animated by a sincere desire to frame its legislation upon the principles of equity and justice. I have a strong belief that the greatest object which we or any other government can contemplate would be to elevate the social condition of that class of the people with whom we are brought into no direct relationship by the exercise of the elective franchise. I wish to convince them that our object has been so to apportion taxation, that we shall relieve industry and labour from any undue burden, and transfer it, so far as is consistent with the public good, to those who are better enabled to bear it. [From Speeches of Sir Robert Peel, 1853, Vol. 4, 698-96.]