

CONNECTING HISTORIES

Learning Package

Commentary

Civil Dissent in Birmingham

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The second part of the learning package gives you the opportunity to use archival resources to explore a particular topic, namely civil dissent in Birmingham. The materials deal with two instances of civil dissent: the 'Priestley riots' of July 1791 and the 'Handsworth riots' of September 1985. The learning package is not about these two series of events (although you may become better informed about them by examining the documents), but rather about the use of archives. As in Part 1 of the package, the documents are accompanied by a brief note providing some context and questions about the kinds of sociological knowledge that might be gained.

You should bear in mind when exploring the archive materials the issues that have been raised in the first part of the learning package, particularly those to do with archives as social knowledge and as sources of sociological evidence. For instance, there is an immediate difficulty with the definition of these historical events, indicated by the use of single inverted commas in the previous paragraph. The term *riot* becomes a way of organising a series of social interactions, of imposing a particular meaning upon them as a particular sort of event, a *riot*. To describe a sequence of events as a riot does not merely impose an order upon them - giving the sequence a temporal fixity (the riot began at this time and ceased to be a riot after another time) and social coherence (participants in the events probably did not see themselves as taking part in a 'riot') - it also places the events under a certain sort of description: this was a 'riot', rather than, say, a protest, a political expression of powerlessness, a concatenation of uncoordinated actions, a revolt, or an uprising. Each of these descriptions carries a normative implication; depending on our political inclinations we might be more sympathetic to an uprising of the oppressed than to a revolt of the rabble. So descriptions not only fix social action, transforming it from a process into an event with a definite temporal span, they are also evaluative and normative, imparting to events a moral worth.

We cannot do without descriptions, however, and this means that we have to be able to discriminate between descriptions. This is primarily the purpose of social research which, by enabling a critical view of the process of description and of the evidence adduced in support of any *particular* description, allows us to examine different types of description and consider whether some are more adequate to the evidence than others. Once again, then, the key issue is the interpretation of evidence and before exploring the archive materials you might want to review the points made in part one about the criteria for interpreting documentary sources.

The archive materials in part two refer to sets of events in the past and what follows is a brief account of those events to place the materials in context. Bearing in mind the partiality of all description, though, you may want to extend and modify these accounts on the basis of your own examination of evidence.

Civil Dissent in Birmingham: 2 Case Studies

Sparkhill 1791

The Priestley Riots, as they became known, took place in Birmingham in July 1791. One of the principal targets of those who took part was the scientist and non-conformist clergyman, Joseph Priestley, after whom the events came to be named. On July 14, 1791 the *Constitutional Society of Birmingham* arranged a dinner at a hotel on Temple Row in the centre of Birmingham to celebrate the second anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, a key moment in the French revolution that had taken place only two years before. Priestley, according to his own account, had little to do with it, but he was a well-known sympathiser of the revolutionary cause. During the course of the night a well organised crowd siezed the occasion to attack the homes of several people suspected of having non-conformist or revolutionary sympathies. Priestley's house at Fairhill in Sparkbrook was sacked and his library and laboratory destroyed (he and his family escaped). Bordesley Hall, home of the the banker John Taylor, was also a target, as was the shop and house of William Hutton, commissioner of the Court of Requests (an 18th century equivalent of the small claims court), which were ransacked. Moseley Hall, owned by Lady Carhampton, was burnt down.

References:

Dick, Malcolm ed. (2005) *Joseph Priestley and Birmingham* Studley: Brewin Books

Handsworth 1985

In Handsworth in 1985, large crowds took to the streets in the Lozells area over the 10th and 11th September in protest against the arrest of a man near the Acapulco Café in Lozells and a police raid on the *Villa Cross* public house in the same area. During the confrontations that ensued, large crowds challenged the police and a number of properties were attacked, 2 people were left dead, 2 unaccounted for and 35 injured. Over 1500 police officers were drafted into the area. This was not the first time that demonstrations against policing had taken place in the area - there was an earlier demonstration in 1981 - nor was it the only confrontation between people in inner city areas and the police in 1985; there were similar instances in Toxteth, Liverpool and in Peckham, London in October.

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