

1826 - 2026



CHATTERTON

Acknowledging The Truth

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WEAVERS UPRISING BICENTENNIAL COMMITTEE

This pamphlet is part of ongoing work towards the acknowledgement of the historical truth of the Chatterton massacre, 26th April 1826. It starts with ten ways in which the truth of the massacre has been concealed by powerful interests in the past and then discusses the convening of an international panel of experts to prepare a statement acknowledging the massacre. This pamphlet is a summary of a chapter in the book *Rise Up! An Anthology Commemorating the Bicentennial of the 1826 Lancashire Rising and Chatterton Massacre* (Scott, D.G. and Hurst, K., 2026).

HIDING A MASSACRE IN PLAIN SIGHT

1. Referring to the massacre as a 'riot'

Authorities and many newspapers denied the truth of what happened at Chatterton by referring to it as a 'riot'. Although the Riot Act was read prior to the indiscriminate killings, exclusive use of the language of 'riot' has had the effect of invisibilising state violence. There is nothing in the word 'riot' that indicates that someone has been shot dead.

2. Referring to the massacre as a 'fight'

Both 'fight' or 'affray' imply both sides in a conflict are relatively equal in terms of potential to harm each other. Whilst the soldiers and cavalry at Chatterton had guns, sabres and bayonets, the protestors were largely unarmed. Three soldiers were reported to have minor injuries. At least six protestors were shot dead and the number of wounded or those who later died of their injuries is unknown. None of the dead protestors presented a threat to the life of their killer[s].



3. False evidence in the legal depositions

False witness evidence was given to legal authorities by the Rostron brothers (John and Lawrence) – the owners of the mill in Edenfield - about the actions of one of the massacre victims, **Mary Simpson**. Lies were told and negative reputations spread claiming she had led machine breaking in Edenfield as means of justifying her killing. In fact, Simpson had missed her coach and was not involved in the protests. Her inquest verdict was ‘accidental death’.

4. Limited number of inquest witnesses for first five known deaths

Only two witnesses gave evidence to the inquest for the first five people killed – **James Lord, John Ashworth, James Rothwell, Richard Lund** and Mary Simpson. This indicates a reluctance to investigate the killings in any depth from the start.

5. Restricting access to the press at the inquest

The failure to make the inquests open to the press reflected both the chaotic nature of what happened and a desire to contain the narrative. However, the inquest testimonies of John Platt and Betty Upton regarding the sixth death, **James Waddicar**, were leaked to the newspapers and summaries published.

6. Evidence and tone of witness testimonies changed during inquest.

Reading the original inquest testimonies, it is apparent that Justice of the Peace, James Watkins, played an important part in marshalling evidence. Prior to his interventions witnesses pointed to the chaotic and violent nature of the soldiers. Yet in the testimonies taken (or re-taken) by Watkins JP., the tone and focus of the inquest evidence changes, reinforcing the narrative that the killings were necessary.

7. Preventing witnesses from identifying soldiers

Attempts were made to find the soldier who killed James Waddicar. The military used delaying tactics – denying access to the local constable and witness until ordered by senior officers to do so. This prevented the immediate identification and naming of the soldier and scuppered any possibility of prosecution. The inquest verdict was that Waddicar “was murdered by an unknown soldier”.

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EXTRACT FROM TESTIMONY OF JOHN PLATT, 28TH APRIL 1826:

[My] daughter looked out at the window and saw Waddicar lying at her door and in a few moments some four or five of the rifle corps came to the door. Seeing Waddicar lying there they said 'you are foxing it' and they tried to open the door but could not. They then broke the window with their guns and some of them fired into the house. They did so several times and they saw me [Platt] and my daughter [Upton] and swore they would shoot us and kept calling us to open the door. I said they could not. It was nailed up and I desired the soldiers to push at it and they did. Me and my daughter helped them, and they got the door open. Four or five soldiers came in and immediately seized me and put their guns to my belly and swore they would shoot me. I begged for my life and told them I was there to protect my daughter who lived there. At last, they believed me, but they heard somebody upstairs and some of them went up and in a short time I heard they were rough. I went upstairs and found one of them having hold of my daughter Alice and another hold of Mary Whitaker and swearing they would shoot them.

EXTRACT FROM TESTIMONY OF ELIZABETH [BETTY] UPTON, 28 APRIL 1826:

I heard a fire close to my house and smelt the powder. I heard a person make a moan and something fall close to my door. I looked out of the chamber window and saw James Waddicar lying at my door. I went downstairs directly and by the time I got there several of the soldiers in green were trying to force the door. I heard one of them say here 'he lies, damn him, he is foxing, run through'... At the same moment my window was broken by the ends of their guns, and I heard one of them say he had seen a woman, and they fired their guns into my house... In a little time, they said again they had seen a woman and they fired again. I begged for my life and called out that I was only a widow and lived there. They told me I was one of the 'rioters' and demanded the door to be opened... When the soldiers got in they were very rough... They were so violent and I was so frightened that I took one of the soldiers round the neck and begged of him to spare our lives. Then the soldiers heard somebody upstairs, my two sisters ... Two of the soldiers had hold of my sister and they pointed their guns at her belly and swearing they would blow her brains out ...

8. Redeploying soldiers to Portugal

The 60th Duke of York Rifles were soon afterwards relocated to Portugal, preventing any further interrogation of the soldiers.

9. Lack of criminal prosecutions for anyone at Chatterton

Although there were several arrests at Chatterton (including the local constable!) there were no criminal prosecutions of any of the protestors at Chatterton at the 1826 Lancaster Assize.

10. Secondary portrayals

The selective citation of the inquest evidence and legal depositions emphasising the potential threat of the protestors in the secondary literature, has also helped to conceal the truth of the Chatterton massacre. The failure to re-examine or critically scrutinise archival evidence for years left the dominant framing and official claims unchallenged and truth denied.



ACKNOWLEDGING THE TRUTH: AN INTERNATIONAL PANEL

To facilitate acknowledgement of the indiscriminate killings at Chatterton as a massacre, The Open University and York University have, in collaboration with the European Group for the Study of Deviance and Social Control, convened an international panel of experts on state violence to:

1. Study and reflect upon the inquest witness testimony and legal depositions
2. Reflect upon whether the indiscriminate killings at Chatterton meet all the criteria of a massacre
3. Publish a public statement based on the above considerations which aims to acknowledge the historical truth of what happened at Chatterton, 26th April 1826.

The statement of the international panel will be published in October 2026.



EUROPEAN GROUP
FOR THE STUDY OF DEVIANCE & SOCIAL CONTROL