

1826 - 2026



THE RISING IN QUESTION[S]

Remembering and commemorating
the 1826 Weavers Uprising

www.weavers-uprising.org.uk

WEAVERS UPRISING BICENTENNIAL COMMITTEE

The 1826 Weavers Uprising was one of the most significant events in early 19th century Britain. Yet despite its significance, there are competing interpretations of what happened and why. This pamphlet, written on behalf of the *Weavers Uprising Bicentennial Committee* [WUBC], will accompany events and activities at heritage sites in Lancashire during the bicentennial year [See <https://www.weavers-uprising.org.uk>]. The following five Frequently Asked Questions [FAQ's] are followed by brief answers and then suggestions where you can learn more.

I. WHAT WAS THE '1825 PANIC' AND WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT FOR UNDERSTANDING THE 1826 LANCASHIRE WEAVERS UPRISING?

The 1825 panic was the first global financial crisis and had devastating consequences for countries all around the world, but most notably England. The term the '1825 panic' refers specifically to the banking crisis of December 1825, but this was merely the peak of nearly a year of deepening financial and economic turmoil. Earlier in 1825 there had been a stock market crash, placing the financial system under considerable pressure. There were several reasons for the '1825 Panic'. First, the English banking system was not fit for purpose. Second, the issuing of promissory notes by Country Banks had got out of hand. Third speculative and high-risk investments in Latin America had turned bad. Fourth there was a collapse of business confidence. As a consequence of the '1825 panic' - the most significant banking crisis of the 19th century - there was a deep economic depression and the widespread suspension of trade. Although all trades and all parts of England were affected by the crisis, hardest hit were the manufacturing districts in the north, especially the cotton trade and manufactures in Lancashire and West Yorkshire. With no trade, and the suspension of the manufacture of new goods, there was no work. Unemployment in Pennine Lancashire spiralled out of control in late 1825 and early 1826.

2. WERE THE POWER-LOOMS THE REAL CAUSE OF THE HANDLOOM WEAVERS' DISTRESS IN 1826?

There can be little doubt that the introduction of new power-looms for the weaving of cotton was hugely unpopular with the handloom weavers' of Lancashire. The power-looms had first been invented in the late 18th century, but it was not until several years later that their introduction became more widespread across the country. In 1826, the power-looms were too inefficient and too few to cause the extensive economic precarity and distress facing the Lancashire handloom weavers' at that time. Indeed, it was not until the mid-1830s and beyond that the power-looms began to replace the handloom. This being said, it was abundantly clear in 1826 that the power-looms would soon present an existential threat to handloom weavers' way of life. Therefore, whilst the terrible suffering in 1826 was the combined result of years of economic instability and the consequences of the '1825 panic', the power-loom were still a logical target for the machine breakers. The destruction of the looms sent a symbolic message to authorities about the weavers' near starvation and long-term fears for the future.



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3. SHOULD THE 1826 PROTESTORS BE CALLED LUDDITES?

Technically, Luddite rebellions occurred only between 1811 and 1817. The Luddites, who acquired the name by following the fictional character 'General Ludd', broke various forms of industrial machinery and their protests clustered in several counties in the north of England from Nottingham to Lancashire. In 1812, for example, Luddites in South Lancashire broke machinery to send a symbolic message highlighting the severe economic distress they were then facing. Luddite protests were also led by designated 'captains' appointed from the local community. This immediately draws parallels to the 1826 Lancashire rising. Yet it is also important to note several differences. Significantly, the tactics of the Luddites were often covert, with machine breaking undertaken in small numbers under the cover of night. These raids differ considerably from the daylight destruction of machines involving crowds of thousands in 1826. Nor did the Lancashire protesters rally around the figurehead of General Ludd. There were machine breakers long before and after the Luddites. In Lancashire, the tradition of machine breaking dated back as far as the 1760s. Machine breaking persisted into the 1830s and 1840s, with perhaps the most well-known being those of 'Captain Swing'. The 1826 Lancashire protesters were, like the Luddites before them, representatives of a long tradition of machine breaking protests. The 1826 Lancashire rising is then interrelated to, but also distinct from, the Luddites.



4. WHERE THE EVENTS OF 1826 A 'RIOT' OR 'RISING'?

In the 1820s a 'riot' had legally occurred after the 1714 Riot Act was read. The reading of the Riot Act by a magistrate did not mean that people in a crowd were acting in a manner that was threatening to others or engaging in property destruction. Rather it merely indicated that a magistrate wished to disperse the crowd of 12 or more people considered to be a 'riotous assembly'. Even if everybody dispersed immediately, a 'riot' had still legally taken place. Because of the wide-ranging scope of events falling under its remit, there are no essential characteristics of a 'riot'. A 'rising' of the people, on the other hand, has several clear characteristics. A 'rising' was

- motivated by problematic social and economic conditions.
- a public protest involving large numbers of people.
- disciplined and focused.
- ultimately aiming to send a symbolic message to those in power.

Whilst a 'riot' could refer to almost anything, a popular 'rising' reflected widespread discontent and social distress. A 'rising' was a way for people with no political representation at local or national level to express their voice. In the four days between the 24th-27th April 1826 the Riot Act was read on several occasions, but this tells us little about the nature of the events. In fact, using the language of 'riot' conceals the motivations of the crowd, hides the symbolic nature of the machine breaking and denies voice. The term 'rising', which alongside that of 'riot' was a term used at the time to refer to the April 1826 protests, however, reveals the true meaning of the property destruction and what the protestors hoped to achieve.

5. WAS CHATTERTON A MASSACRE?

At least six people was shot dead by soldiers from the 60th Duke of York Rifles at Chatterton on the 26th of April 1826. The people who died were all unarmed. At worst, those who died were either engaging in property destruction or had thrown stones at soldiers. Several of those who died, however, were bystanders or were running away when killed. Newspaper reports in April and May 1826 claimed that three further bodies were found on the 27th of April 1826 in nearby woods and the number of people seriously wounded or later died from injuries remains unknown. A massacre arises if three or more relatively defenceless non-combatants are indiscriminately killed at approximately the same time and location whilst presenting no significant threat to life of their killer[s]. None of the six people known to have died at Chatterton on 26th April 1826 - **James Lord, John Ashworth, James Rothwell, Richard Lund, Mary Simpson and James Waddicar** - presented any danger to the lives of the soldiers. All were shot in close physical proximity (in and around Chatterton) and their times of death were similar. There is little doubt that the indiscriminate killings at Chatterton amounts to a massacre, yet concerted attempts have been made to conceal the truth, both at the time and in the years since. One way of concealing the truth is to refer to what happened as a 'fight' or 'riot'. There is nothing in the words 'riot' or 'fight' which indicate that six or more people were indiscriminately shot dead by soldiers.

Where can I find more detailed answers to these questions?

For a short discussion of the 1825 Panic see: Scott, D.G. (2025) "Policing the First Global Financial Crisis: Remembering The 1825 Panic" HERC, The Open University <https://university.open.ac.uk/research-centres/herc/blog/policing-first-global-financial-crisis-remembering-1825-panic>

You can watch a short film on the limitations of the 'power loom riots' narrative at Huckleberry Films YouTube: Summary of Rise Up! book chapter 'Framing The Weavers' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1LnZiYVKsA>

You can find out more about the history of the Luddites in Lancashire at: The Luddite Bicentenary, 1811-1817 at <https://ludditebicentenary.blogspot.com/2012/02/historical-context-of-luddism-in.html>

For an excellent overview of the 'Lancashire Rising' see: Walsh, D. (1994) "The Lancashire Rising of 1826" in Albion Volume 26 , Issue 4 , Winter 1994 , pp. 601 - 621

The case for why the indiscriminate killings on 26th April 1826 should be called a massacre can found in the article: Scott, D. and Hurst, K. (2025) "Was Chatterton a Massacre?" in North West History Journal, No,50 <https://oro.open.ac.uk/104703/1/Was%20Chatterton%20A%20Massacre%20North%20West%20History%20Journal%20No%2050.pdf>