

Magna Carta - 800 Years

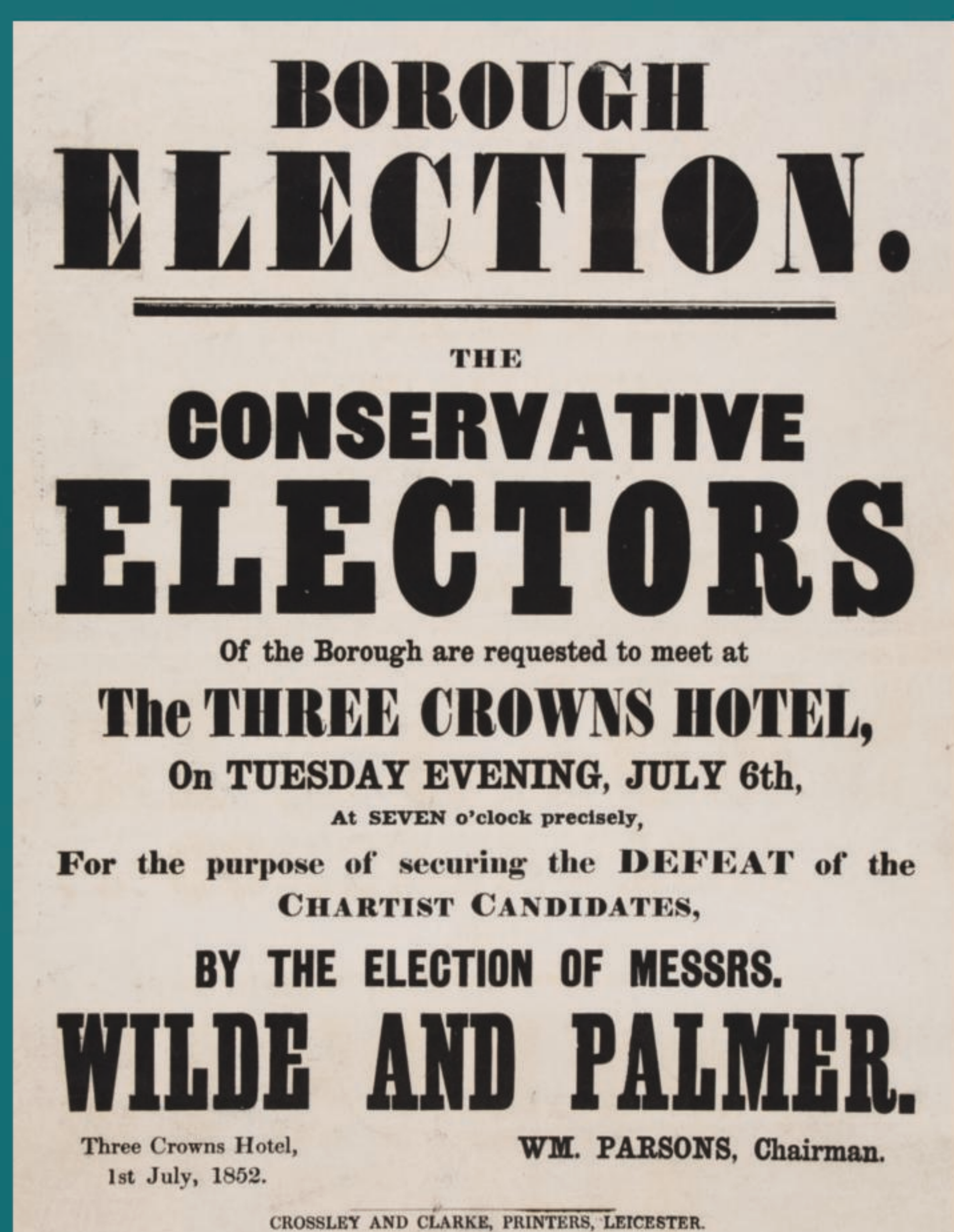
From Charter to Chartists

By the end of the seventeenth century there had been several important developments. In 1628 Sir Edward Coke, a prominent barrister and politician was instrumental in drafting the Petition of Right, a statement of civil liberties sent by parliament to Charles I. Royal authority was challenged further by the civil war and Commonwealth. In 1679 the Habeas Corpus Act strengthened ancient rights which prevented unfair detention. The Bill of Rights was passed in 1689, setting out the limitations of the monarch's power and the rights of citizens to elections and freedom of speech.

The nineteenth century saw even more radical demands put forward by the Chartists, many of whom were ordinary working people who saw the need for reform. Inspired by Magna Carta and the changes wrought by the 1832 Reform Act, the Chartists set out a plan demanding:

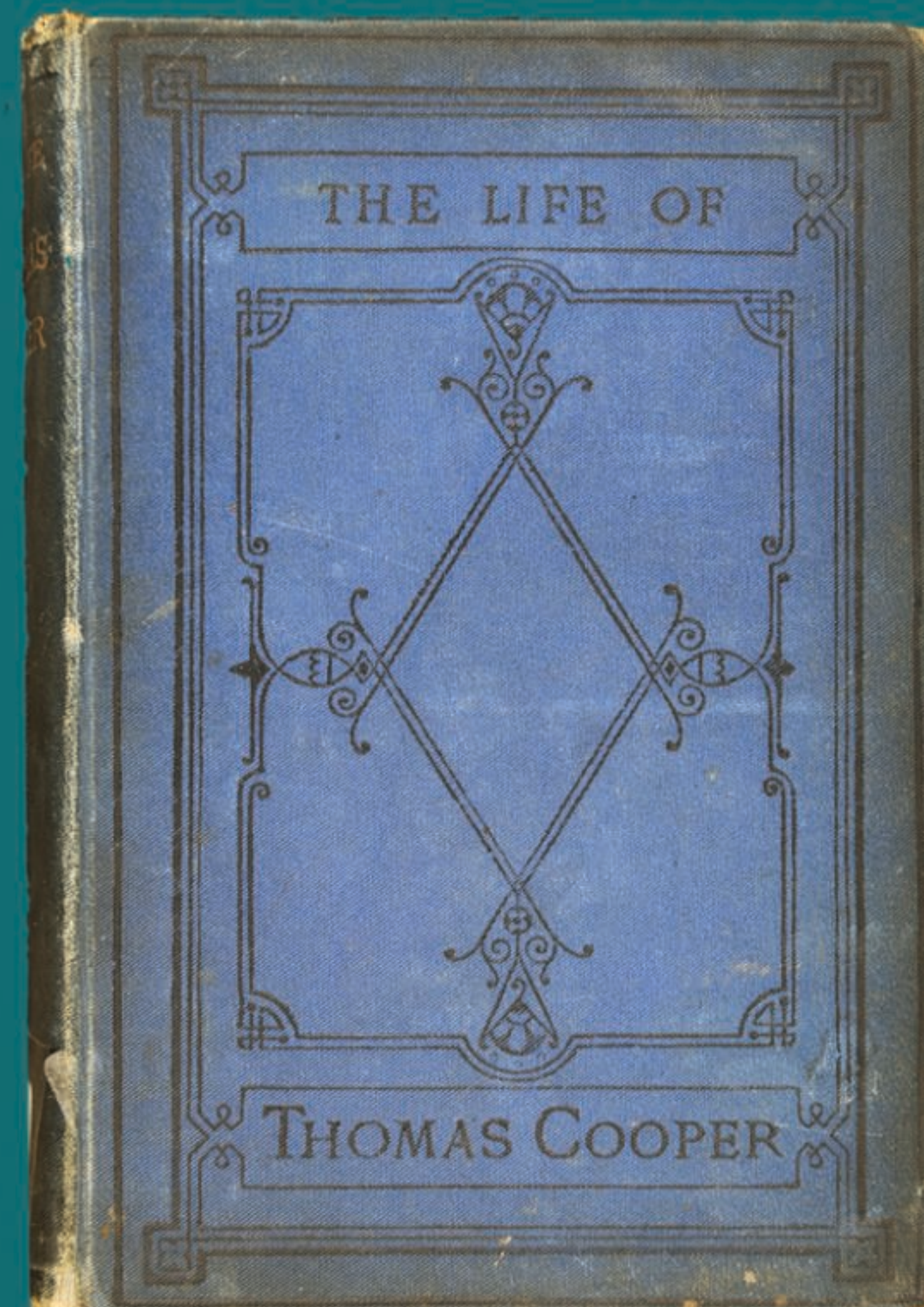
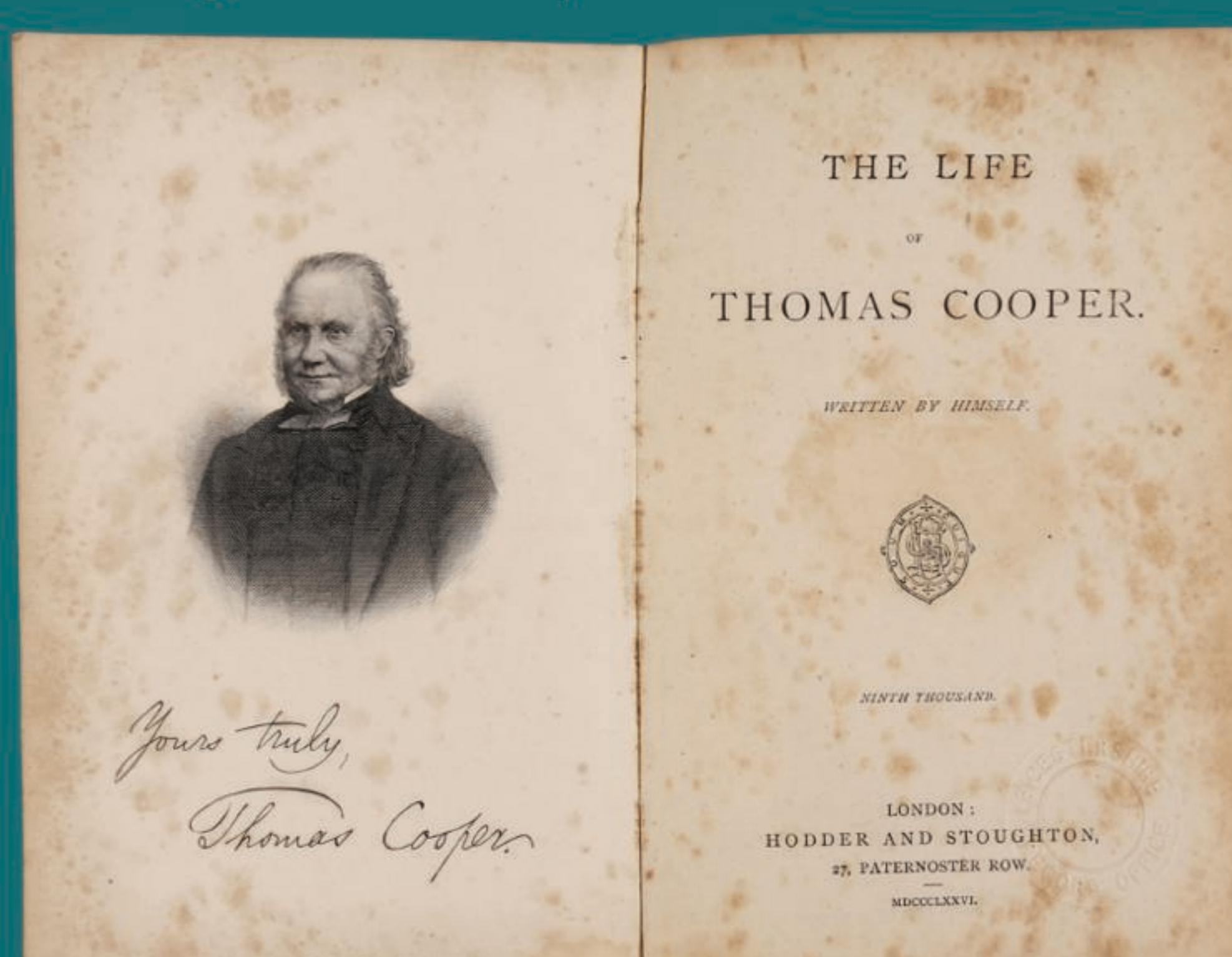
- All men should have the vote and there should be a secret ballot
- Members of Parliament should be paid and should not need to own property in order to become MPs
- Electoral districts of equal size
- Annual parliaments

Thomas Cooper was a prominent Leicester Chartist and many in the city strongly supported the movement. Born in Leicestershire in 1805, Cooper spent much of his early life in Lincolnshire, returning to the city in 1840. Although coming from a humble background, he was educated and held a post at the Leicester Mercury before becoming the editor of the Midland Counties Illuminator, a Chartist Journal.



Not everyone was in favour of the Chartists as this 1852 poster shows

In 1842 he was arrested in Leicester and imprisoned in Staffordshire for encouraging rioting and arson. He was acquitted of these charges but quickly arrested again for sedition, (speeches and activities encouraging rebellion) and sentenced to two years in prison.



Cooper was released in 1845 and, although remaining committed to the Chartist cause, he was increasingly out of step with its leaders, especially Feargus O'Connor. By 1848, he had distanced himself from the Chartists, becoming a religious lecturer and publishing several works including poetry and novels. He died in Lincoln in 1892.

Of course Cooper was a prominent member of a large number of Leicester Chartists. William Jones of Pelham Street in Leicester was also a poet and corresponded with Cooper. Similarly, George Buckby and Thomas Winters were prominent in the local movement and records relating to them are held by the Record Office.

